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## The Roots of Brass Bands in Ghana: The Premier Brass Band in Winneba

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### Abstract



The main purpose of the paper is to document the provenance, growth, achievements, challenges and prospects of the first brass band formed in Winneba - the Winneba Yamoahs Brass Band. Using interviews and document review, the paper traces events leading to the band's formation, the birth of the band, growth and sustenance, recruitment and training of members, achievements, challenges and the prospects of the band which remained in oral context with early band members and owners of the band and thus risked being lost with the passage of time. Major findings from the study such as the circumstances leading to the formation of the band and achievements since its formation places the band as a pacesetter among brass bands in Winneba and recommends that an interest be taken in writing on similar bands or groups that have no written history yet.

**Keywords:** brass bands, Yamoahs, Winneba, fancy dress, premier, military band

## Introduction

Brass band music has become part of the culture of many a society globally. Tracing its beginnings from the early to mid-nineteenth century, "brassbands were one of the principal focuses of community music making in the United Kingdom" (Herbert, 1992, p.1). The practice has evolved and spread to many countries and communities, owing to varied factors and conditions such as the innovations in brass instrument construction, the outbreak of civil wars, the use of brass bands to propagate the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the United States of America, as an exemplar, the spread of brass bands arose from the production of quality musical instruments for the common man which helped to foster the creation of the town band. Making the popularity of the brass band even stronger in America was the outbreak of the Civil War, as every fighting unit wanted to have a quality musical group with them (Frederick, 2003). There was also the use of the brass band by some religious leaders like General William Booth who, around 1880, used the Salvation Army Band to draw crowd and spread the word of the Lord (Hosler, 1992; Rhodes, 2007). The brass band combination, according to Kennedy and Kennedy (2007), is found all over Europe and in countries settled by Europeans, but highest standard of performance is possibly reached in North of England, Lancashire and Yorkshire, where its popularity is great.

Indeed, the settlement of Europeans as noted by Kennedy and Kennedy (2007) for various reasons as economic, colonisation, and religious came with a ripple of their music as they used in their religious and colonising missions (Hukporti, 2014) and perform during their leisure hours (Collins, 1989). Ghana, (then named Gold Coast by the colonialist), had its share of these activities by the Europeans when they settled in the coastal areas and got greatly influenced by the instruments and music brought down. These events contributed to the beginning of brass band music in Ghana, spreading beyond its coastal areas, and have remained part of the Ghanaian musical culture.

It is worth noting that the introduction of brass and military band music has been with Ghanaian community folks, schools, churches and security services such as the Police and Army since the arrival of European merchants and missionaries (Hukporti, 2014; Wuaku, 2015). However, literature on the history of brass bands in Ghana has overly concentrated on the general provenance of the ensemble without paying attention to the documentation of the history of any particular brass band. Hukporti (2014), for instance, provided history on the coming of brass band into the then Gold Coast by the colonial army and the missionaries but did not particularize the history of any of the Ghanaian brass bands formed during the period. Similarly, Wuaku (2015) did a contextual study of brass band music in the Peki-Kpando area in the Volta region of Ghana without the history of any particular band there albeit providing history of

general brass band music in Ghana. This means that the history of even the renowned or popular brass bands in Ghana still remain in oral context. The dire implication of this is that with the passing on of the founders and pioneers of brass bands in Ghana without any written history, history on such brass bands may be in extinct. Realising the gap created in the written history of brass bands in Ghana, the article seeks to fill the gap with focus on the premier brass band in Winneba - the Yamoahs Brass Band. Through a case study research design, the study investigated the beginnings of Yamoahs brass band in Winneba, explored its survival overtime, documented its gains, divulged some of its challenges and documented some of the things it seeks to achieve in the years to come. It is envisaged that this article adds to the paucity of literature on the history of brass bands in Ghana.

## Literature Review

A brass band, as the name suggests, is a group of brass instruments (Randel, 1978) usually using percussion to accompany its music. According to Kennedy and Kennedy (2007), the term, brass, is technically used to cover instruments formerly made of brass metal, some of which, however, are now sometimes made of other metals. It does not include instruments formerly made of wood and now made of metal; an example being the flute (Figure 1). It does not also apply to metal instruments with reed mouth pieces; example, the saxophone (Figure 2).



*Figure 1: The flute (transverse)*



*Figure 2: Saxophones (reed instruments)*

Rather, “each instrument in the brass family possesses a mouthpiece of the nature of a cup or funnel to be pressed against the player’s lips, which vibrate within it something like the double reed of the oboe family” (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2007, pp. 99-100). See Figure 3.



*Figure 3: Cup and funnel-shaped mouthpieces used by brass instruments*

Among the popular brass instruments used by Ghanaian brass bands are the Trumpet (Figure 4), Cornet (Figure 5), Flugelhorn (Figure 6), Trombone (Figure 7), Euphonium (Figure 8), and the Tuba (Figure 9).



*Figure 4: Trumpet*



*Figure 5: Cornet*



*Figure 6: Flugelhorn*



*Figure 7: Trombone*



*Figure 8: Euphonium*



*Figure 9: Tuba*

Other instruments, although not made of brass, have traditionally become part of the ensemble. This is especially the percussion section of the ensemble which often provide rhythmic timelines and other special effects the band wants to achieve. In Ghana, the common percussion instruments used are the bass drum (Figure 10), snare drum (Figure 11), tenor drum (Figure 12), and the pair of cymbals (Figure 13).



Figure 10: Bass drum



Figure 11: Snare drum



Figure 12: Tenor drum



Figure 13: Cymbal

Today, in a bid to indigenise brass band music in Ghana, depending on the community where the band is located or where the music performed comes from, some brass bands make use of local membranophones (see Figures 14 and 15) and idiophones to accompany the music as noted by Ebonyi (2015), Wuaku (2015) and Hukporti (2014). These local instruments are used either in addition to the percussions illustrated earlier or used alone. Examples of such idiophones are the *dawuro* (bell) - see Figure 16; *dawurta* (double bell) - Figure 17; *firikiyiwa*, (castanet) - Figure 18; and *axatse* (gourd rattle) - Figure 19.



*Figure 14: Local Ghanaian membranophones*



*Figure 15: Dzembe*



*Figure 16: Dawuro*



*Figure 17: Dawurta*



*Figure 18: Firikiyiwa*



*Figure 19: Axatse*

On the international front, apart from the general history of the coming into being of the brass band by authors like Kennedy and Kennedy (2007); Herbert (2000); Hazen & Hazen (1987); and Russel and Elliot (1936), one can also get the documented history of renowned bands like the New Orleans Brass Bands by Knowles (1996), the Black Dyke (Mills) Band by Newsome (2005), and the Besses-o'Th'-Barn Band by Hampson (1893).

Here in Ghana, in spite of the adaptation of the brass band by the indigenes on the coastal lands including Elmina, Cape Coast and Anomabu who first encountered the European traders and missionaries (Hukporti, 2014; Micots, 2012) thereby maintaining some of the practices brought down which led to the formation of brass bands in these areas and beyond, attention has not been given by scholars to the documentation of the history of such bands. In his historical inquiry into military band in Ghana, Hukporti (2014) discussed the advent of brass band and its music to the Gold Coast. Similarly, Wuaku (2015) in taking a contextual study of brass band music in the Peki-Kpando area in the Volta region of Ghana and Rumbolz (2002) and in his study of brass bands in Ghana both touched on the genesis of brass band globally and its coming down to the then Gold Coast. However, the historical specificities of the bands could be said to have been overlooked. Brown (2005), who did not write specifically on brass bands in Ghana,

only traced the history of brass bands that play at the famous masquerade festival today to the year when brass bands started playing for the masquerade groups.

## **Methodology**

In approaching the study, a case study research design was used. Seidu (2006) is of the view that a case study involves an intensive investigation on the complex factors that contributed to the individuality of a social unit, a person, a family or a group of people. This was appropriate for the study because the data gathered and organized were relevant to a social unit: Yamoahs Brass Band. The data collection instruments used were interviews and document review to unearth the processes and trends of development that were evident throughout the study. In the process, both primary and secondary data were collected. Primary data relevant to the study were collected from the band. A total of 30 bandsmen comprising both old and new members were purposefully used for the study. The old members who were 5 in number were interviewed to narrate the beginnings as well as some of the gains of the band. The participants gave the needed information orally and face-to-face (Khan, 2014). By the nature of the study, it was appropriate that the members were interviewed as a group during their rehearsals to explain some of their achievements, challenges, sustained activities and what they hope to achieve in the future. Whilst I had the privilege of interviewing past members of the band who witnessed the formation of the band and some current members, searches from published books, articles, research thesis, and online were made to complement the information gathered from informants in the interview. Interviews conducted were audio-recorded and transcribed.

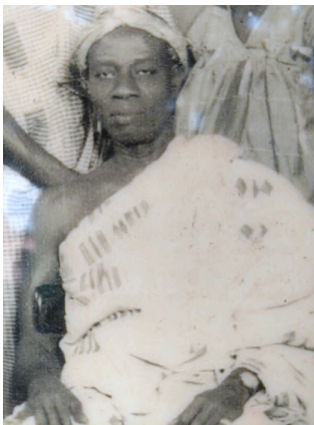
## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Birth of the band**

According to the interviewees, at the inception of the annual Winneba Fancy Dress Competition, otherwise known as the Masqueraders Festival (Masquefest) in 1942, one of the competing parties, the No. 4 Red Cross group used to go to Abura, a suburb in Cape Coast to contract a brass band to come down to Winneba to play for them. According to them, going to and fro Cape Coast took them between one and two weeks to get a band. This practice went on until after the 1957 edition of the competition when Christian Yamoah, also known as Papa Kweku Attah, a general merchant, summoned members of the masquerading group and challenged them as to why they could not also learn to play the brass instruments and play for their masquerade group and others. Upon acceptance of the idea by the group, Yamoah as a general merchant who used to import building materials and general goods to trade in imported a few brass instruments for the group to start learning. By the end of 1957, the band had been formed with a total of twenty-four (24) members or bandsmen under the name



"Winneba Yamoahs Brass Band". Thus, by New Year Day in 1958 - the day scheduled for the annual event - the band was fully ready to perform and indeed had their first performance at the competition that year. The band was first led by a son of the founder named Oscar Yamoah, who played the trumpet. Figures 20 and 21 show the founder and the first band leader respectively.



*Figure 20: Christian Yamoah*  
(Founder of Yamoahs Brass Band)



*Figure. 21: Oscar Yamoah*  
(First leader of Yamoahs Brass Band)

(Source: Pictures provided by Frank Agyei family member/interviewee)

Realising the avidity with which the bandsmen learned and played the instruments, and the hankering of many more members of the group and the town folk to learn and join to perform for the Red Cross Fancy Dress Group, Yamoah imported more of the instruments until they had a full set. Among the instruments used in the early years of the band were Trumpets, Alto horns (see Figure 22), Trombones, Baritones (see Figure 23), Euphoniums, and Tubas. It is necessary to mention that the instruments shown in this article are not the same ones used by the band at its inception but modern versions of them.





Figure 22: Alto horn



Figure 23: Baritone

### Growth and sustenance

The growth and sustenance of Yamoahs Brass Band, Winneba, have largely depended on the patronage of the band's services, the desire and recruitment of new members, and its participation in the annual Fancy Dress Competition in Winneba. Soon after its formation and first performance, the band started offering services to clients or brass band patrons. It has continued in this vein to date in the form of providing music at funerals, wedding ceremonies, party receptions, and street processions. Part of the proceeds from such engagements is used in maintaining the instruments and in purchasing new ones when necessary. Patronage of the band extends beyond the boundaries of Winneba and even the Central Region where the band is based. In terms of recruitment, the band's membership is open to the general public (especially the youth) who either play any of the brass instruments already or join to receive tuition. Instructors of the band, in the past, have included students and lecturers of the then National Academy of Music (NAM) in Winneba, now the Department of Music Education in the University of Education, Winneba. In addition, by virtue of having to prepare and perform for the Red Cross Fancy Dress Group at the annual Masqueraders Festival, the band has been maintained and has had to improve on its performance year by year. The following images depict the band's participation in the annual festival.



Figure 24: Picture of band before going to Park



Figure 25: Band waiting to perform at the competition



*Figure 26: Yamoahs Brass Band marching at Winneba Fancy Dress Competition*

**Source:** Pictures provided by interviewees (Figure 24 captured by author from framed photograph provided by interviewee)

### **Achievements of the band**

The band counts among its achievements the privilege to perform at the National Independence Day Parade held annually at the Independence Square, Accra, the nation's capital in the early 1970's and having been called upon each year to perform at the same parade held in Winneba on the 6th of March every year. Also, as part of the Fancy Dress Competition, bands that accompany the masqueraders are also inspected by the adjudicators and the band has been adjudged the best; and also helped the No. 4 Red Cross to be victors of the competition on countless occasions. Furthermore, the band prides itself with the fact that it has been the only band since the year 2003 which is hired by masquerading groups in Swedru, a nearby town to Winneba, during their masqueraders festival. The inception of a competition for brass bands in Winneba by the Unity Power Group, a non-governmental organisation in 2016, had seen the Yamoahs Brass Band win 1st position in the first two editions and runners-up in the third edition held in July, 2018. This competition is held on Ghana's Republic Day, the 1st of July. Figures 27, 28, and 29 show the band and the trophies won over the three-year period.



*Figure 27: Yamoahs Brass Band displays trophies won at 2016 Winneba Brass Bands competition*



*Figure 28: Yamoahs Brass Band receiving trophy for placing 1st at 2017 band competition*



*Figure 29: The Band being rewarded as runners-up after 2018 brass band competition  
(Source: Pictures courtesy of Ebenezer Dontoh)*

## Challenges and prospects

Yamoahs Brass Band, like many other organisations, has its peculiar challenges. One of such challenges has been the rate at which members leave Winneba for other towns and sometimes the country. This exodus often arises out of educational and economic reasons where members leave for further studies or have to go and work outside Winneba. The phenomenon sometimes costs the band financially, especially, when such members have to be invited to join others home for major programmes like Fancy Dress Competition and the band has to see to their welfare. The evolution of other bands within the Winneba municipality has also come to end the monopoly the band used to enjoy. Moreover, although a few members in the band can read music from staff notation to play on their instruments, the band considers their general deficiency to read and play as a band a major handicap. Nevertheless, the band, considering its beginnings and how far it has come sees the future to be bright. It envisages that in the very near future, it will take its expertise outside the shores of Ghana as one of its competitors has.

## Conclusions

The study has captured events leading to the formation of the first brass band in Winneba - Yamoahs Brass Band as arising from the desire to play for its own masquerade group for the annual fancy dress competition. Furthermore to this was how the band was nurtured and has been sustained to date, the strides made over the years and the challenges and prospects of the band. The article, therefore, concludes that of all the brass bands in Winneba today, the Yamoahs Brass Band stands out as a pacesetter by virtue of being the first to be formed, the most popular, patronised, and decorated. Also, like many other brass bands in Ghana, the band does not read its repertoire from staff noted music but uses other means such as rote learning, also known as playing by heart, or using the solfege. It recommends that scholars take interest in other renowned brass bands in Ghana and document their history lest we lose them.

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## Sources of the figures from online

### Figure 1 and 2

[https://www.google.com.gh/search?q=flute+and+saxophone&rlz=1C1OKWM\\_enGH808GH808&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi7wJuH0cDeAhXpCcAKHUA2Az0Q\\_AUIDigB&biw=1280&bih=692](https://www.google.com.gh/search?q=flute+and+saxophone&rlz=1C1OKWM_enGH808GH808&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi7wJuH0cDeAhXpCcAKHUA2Az0Q_AUIDigB&biw=1280&bih=692)

### Figures 3:

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### Figure 4 – 9:

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### Figure 10 – 13:

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### Figure 14 – 15:

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### Figure 16 – 19:

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