INDIGENOUS ORIGINS OF GHANAIAN HIGHLIFE MUSIC

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the original indigenous music of the foundation emergence and the decline of Ghanaian highlife music. The foundations of Ghanaian highlife music can be traced between the1880s and the 1920s through Ghanaian native entertainment music, colonial military and police marching bands, local masquerades, brass bands and the popular 'concert' party theatre. Ghanaian highlife music emerged on the scene from the 1920s to the 1970s.The first Ghanaian highlife music was recorded in 1928 in London by the Kumasi trio under the leadership of Jocob Sam. This indigenous music style was known as the palmwine highlife music. It rose to its peak during the independent and post independent eras with hits such as E. K. Annang's 'Onua do' and E..H. K. Williams 'mene wobeko Tamale'. The momentum was sustained in the post-independent era by Daniel Amponsah's rendition of 'Yaa Amponsah' and 'Odo Akosomo' and Kwaa Mensah's 'Odo me, me som do no'. The end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s saw the decline of indigenous Ghanaian highlife music with the advent of both popular music from Europe and America and electric guitar bands. Today, Daniel Amponsah popularly known as Koo Nimo stands as a living legend of the indigenous Ghanaian highlife music style.

Introduction

Highlife was a neo-traditional music that sprung up in West Africa during the colonial era. It began as a combination of traditional African and European instrumental,

melodic, rhythmic and harmonic music. According to Collins (1991:80) and Graham (1994:287), highlife emerged on the musical scene of West Africa in the 1920s. Collins further stresses that the greatest success of highlife as it was then known was in the 1950s and 1960s. The Wikipedia, Free Encyclopedia however states that, as a musical genre, highlife originated in Ghana in the 1900s and rapidly spread to Sierra Leone, Nigeria and other West African countries by 1920.

Despite the disparity in the date regarding the time and place of origin, it is generally agreed that the term 'highlife' was coined in the 1920s. It was very popular among the English-speaking West African countries particularly Ghana and Nigeria. It had reference to 'the kind of "European-derived evening of dressing-up and dancing". It also enjoyed a high patronage of the dance clubs, the cafés and the elite class in society. The ordinary people, who gathered outside the dance clubs to listen because they did not have the means to enter the clubs coined the term highlife for the music (Graham, ibid).

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the indigenous origins of highlife music in Ghana from its foundations of the 1880-1920, its emergence of the1920-1970 its decline around 1970.

Foundations of Indigenous Ghanaian highlife

Formation of Native, Military and Police Marching Bands

The foundations of indigenous Ghanaian highlife music stretched roughly between the 1840s and 1920s. By the year 1841, the European settlers at the Cape Coast Castle had set up a native band with the sole aim of playing Western military and dance music. This native band, according to Nketia's (1974a:16) quotation from John Beecham, had a high sense of musical taste and performed 'admirably by ear, several of the most popular English tunes".

Among the German trained Cameroonian soldiers captured during the West African frontier force war of 1901 were a group of bandsmen whom the Germans had trained. The authorities joined these musicians with their Ghanaian counterparts to form the standard band of the Gold Coast Regiment. By 1930, they had been trained to perform all kinds of music artistically. Initially, the authorities formed the band to play music for marching troops who were on the march and also to instill a swing of movement into close formation movement. They later re-organized it into the current military dance and brass band respectively.

Previously the colonial government had formed the Police band in 1918 initially for parades, state engagements and the entertainment of the police personnel. Later on, it had a corps of drums (bugles and drums) and a 'concert' band (in the Ghanaian context, a group that acts drama and plays music to entertain the public).

Before the attainment of independence, the military and police bands were an important source of entertainment for the European officers and merchants who lived in the Europeans forts and castles along the coast. These bands according to Nketia (1974a: 16), 'entertained people at the European clubs and played for the garden parties held by governors of the colonies'

The formation of Brass bands and Masquerade groups

Fife-and-drum and brass bands attached to the European military forts played Western military marches and dance music. From the 1870s Caribbean troops were brought to Cape Coast to help the British fight the Ashanti. In their spare time, the troops played 'their own syncopated Creole mentos and calypsos'. Then in the 1880s British trained Ghanaian soldiers set up their own brass bands such as the 'Lions Soldiers' and 'Edu Magicians'. These bands played their own versions of syncopated music for marching which combined Caribbean and local rhythms.

The Akan coastal Fanti people used to crown their funeral sessions with a very vigorous dance music known as *adaha*. It was contended that the pain from death should not be allowed to devastate people forever. Mourners were, therefore, helped to forget their sorrows towards the end of a funeral by coming to the open to take a few vigorous dancing steps to *adaha* funeral music. Brass bands and masquerade groups incorporated *adaha* into their music on account of its vigour. The music of the local brass bands that subsequently evolved from the military bands came to be known as *Adaha* Brass band highlife. According to Collins this was the earliest recognized form of highlife.

From this humble beginning, and as if by a wild fire in the harmattan, brass band music spread from the coastal towns and villages to the hinterland. Many of these towns and villages, such as Akim Akroso, Agona Swedru and Agona Kwanyako came to fame by their respective bands. The repertory of the classical European tunes played by these bands gradually made way for the accommodation of indigenous, religious and other foreign tunes. Collins (1976) informs us further that

> Less well-off towns and villages who could not afford expensive imported brass band instruments made do with a poor-man's version of adaha played

on local percussion and voices called 'konkoma'(or 'konkomba'). Popular from the 1930s it spread as far eastwards as Nigeria, and in the Volta Region of eastern Ghana. It became indigenized during the 1950's when it helped create the 'borborbor' recreational drum-dance style that is still popular amongst Ewe people today.

Brass band music became associated soon afterwards with masquerading carnivals . These masquerades became known among the indigenous Gã as the *emashie* and among the Akan as *kaakaamotobi* because of their grotesque appearance. Since its introduction, the masquerade carnival has become popular with the coastal towns, particularly at Cape Coast, Winneba and Agona Swedru in the central region and Sekondi-Takoradi in the Western Region. Here, during Christmas and other festivals, dancing to brass band music with some traditional touch and the solicitation of alms characterize the performances of the masqueraders. Smaller groups of masqueraders who move from house to house, in contrast, perform and punctuate their dance and music with the blowing of whistles in anticipation of rewards in cash or kind from each household.

In Winneba, for example, one Egyakwa Abraham, a photographer from Cape Coast, started the fancy dress tradition in 1924 as part of the activities of a football competition. During its first Christmas outing, the members wore grotesque masks of wild animals and gods made them appear fanciful and frightening with the assistance of some Saltpond experts. Generous donations were received from the public and the leadership used part of the proceeds to import masks from Germany. The most remarkable result of such an endeavour was the generation of competition among groups because of the increasing public attraction to this new type of creative carnival. In 1958, the various masquerading groups decided to have the first competition ever to be organised among themselves. The groups have continued to organise annual national competitions since then. The department of Centre for National Culture of the government of Ghana has adopted the competitions and reorganised and are formally held every New Year's day under the auspices of the Winneba branch of the Centre

The Ghanaian 'Concert' Party

'Concert' party was a popular theatre that came into vogue during the British Colonial rule in Ghana. Popular theatre is not a new phenomenon in Africa. In his topic on African Popular Theatre: from pre-colonial times to the present day. Kerr (1995) identified and expatiated on several aspects of the genre including syncretic popular theatre involving

Akan concert party and Yoruba opera in Nigeria. In the African context, popular theatre was generally understood to include drama, dance, mime, masquerades and storytelling. Collins (1994) describes the Ghanaian concert party as artists who move from place to place to stage shows in the local languages for audiences in the rural and newly urbanized areas. The style was born out of the concept of Western musical concert. At the heart of this setting is the organization and performance of school concerts on British Empire Day every twenty-fourth day of May. This was the time when cantatas, biblical stories and morality plays were staged by the missionary churches. The first concert party to come into the limelight took place in 1918. It was a three-hour show which paraded to advertise the event. It was acted by Mr. Sam Yalley, a head-teacher of an elementary school in Sekondi at his school on Empire's Day. His dramatic simultaneous act of (as a joker) in costume of a that made him appear as both as an American black and white minstrel caused a sensation.

In her overview of the history and development of Ghanaian concert Cole (2001) defined "concert" as 'a theatrical form that uses humor and music to tell stories conveying moral lessons'. She described how from the 1920s the actors trekked the length and breadth of the British colony performing comic variety shows combining British, American and Ghanaian cultural practices. Of particular interest was the incorporation of American movies, popular British ballads, Latin Gramophone and Negro Spirituals. All of this was blended into a comedy and social commentary involving Ghanaian proverbs, asafo warriors' music and local storytelling traditions. Her work was the first historical analysis of Ghana's concert theatre during the colonial and early postcolonial eras to be supported by empirical data.

The concert party shows which were mainly staged in English gradually changed into Ghanaian languages. Between 1900 and 1930, the audience was mainly composed of educated coastal Africans. After 1930, however, the concert parties increased their scope of audience participation to include inland townships and dwellers in the rural communities. As the venue for the shows moved from the theatre halls to the open-air cinema halls, the prices for watching the shows became more and more affordable. The arrangement of the shows consequently changed from an hour of European songs and theatre sketches to a very long event starting with an African pop music concert from about 8 P.M. to about 1 A.M. This was followed by a lengthy comic melodrama interspersed with highlife tunes to climax the show which ended at dawn.

Dance-Band Highlife Orchestras

The formation of the Native, Military and Police marching bands as well as the brass bands in the Gold Coast paved the way for the establishment of highlife dance band orchestras. The first to appear on the scene was Frank Torto's Excelsior Orchestra which was formed by a group of Ga musicians in 1914. Local tunes and street songs were orchestrated and incorporated into the repertoires of the bands in the 1920s.

Another group of Ga musicians formed the Jazz Kings. According to Collins () it was the custom of these bands to perform ballroom, ragtime and highlife music at cinema and dance halls in Accra and Sekondi for the affluent in the Metropolis. This upper class group attended these shows well-dressed wearing top-hats.

The evening's shows opened with a movie show, followed by 'concert party' theatre shows with ragtime music, jokes and skillful acts performed in English. The show was climaxed with a dance session. It was within such circumstances and setting that the term 'highlife' is believed to have originated in the 1920s. Collins was reliably informed by one Yebuah Mensah, a founding member of the dance band highlife that the people who gathered around outside the clubs to watch and listen the dancing couples inside the clubs enjoyed themselves coined the term 'highlife' because the class of the people inside the dancing clubs was regarded too high for them considering the dresses they wore and entrance fee they paid. They, on the other hand considered themselves far too poor to join the 'high-class life' within the clubs. Consequently, the term was universally applied to 'all the early varieties of Ghanaian popular music, whether played by brass bands, palm wine guitar bands or dance orchestras and bands' (ibid)

Among the highlife dance orchestras that sprung up in the 1930s were the Winneba orchestra, the Sekondi Nanshamang, the Cape Coast Sugar Babies, the Asante Nkramo band, the Koforidua Casino orchestra and the Accra orchestra to mention only a few . The dance bands continued to entertain the elite audiences of black and white Gold Coast administrators with European and Latin American ballroom and ragtime music. Over time, repertoires of songs were expanded to include the main Ghanaian languages of Twi, Ga and Fanti. The dance musicians such as E.T. Mensah successfully developed an indigenous musical style to replace waltz and other fading foreign music. They evolve a musical style with a unique African rhythmic basis. One of the important drummers who brought about this synthesis was Kofi Ghanaba (formerly known as Guy Warren). The indigenous rhythmic foundations of this new fusion included the *konkoma* from Liberia, the Fanti *osibisaba and adaha* from Fante, Vai *gome* and *ashiko* from Sierra Leone and *dagomba* from Northern Ghana.

Emergence Of Indigenous 'Palm-Wine' Ghanaian Highlife

According to Collins (2004) popular music evolved in Ghana from the coastal towns to the southern rural areas during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It developed from a combination of indigenous African, European and New World music of the Black Diaspora. Sailors aboard European and American ships played an important role in the evolution of these genres in West Africa. A typical example was the "Palm wine music" which is believed to have originated with the Kru sailors of Sierra Leone and Liberia who were the first to have used Portuguese guitars in combination with local melodies and rhythms; as well as styles from freed slaves from the Caribbean. It is known in Sierra Leone as *maringa* and was popularized by Ebenezer Calendar and his Maringar Band in their popular song recordings in the 1950s and 1960s.

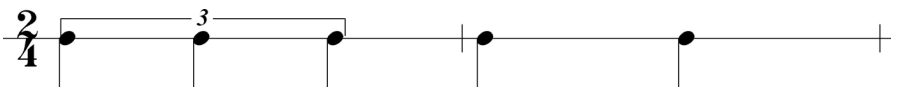
During the Gold Coast era, palm wine music came to be associated with music at the dockside and palm wine drinking bars. The Akan had a tradition of performing music purely for entertainment either as popular street or compound music. Under a big tree in a Ghanaian village, the musician would turn up with his *seperewa* harp-lute and play as an aside to the sale of palm wine while social commentators parodied the various aspects of the social-political life of the people in the community. The guitar gradually came to replace the *seperewa* of the Akan when it became available from shops in the towns and cities.

Musical styles that influenced this development included Fanti recreational music such as *adenkum*, *osibi* and *annkadaamu*; local drums, claves and adakam; Sierra Leonian *ashiko* music which was very popular along the West African coast; the Liberian *Kru* sailors' *fireman* and *mainline* guitar styles, the two-finger plucking guitar technique, and the seperewa harp-lute and *odonson* music of the Ashanti and the Kwahu. The coastal Fante-style music moved a step further inland to Ashanti and Kwahu. Slowly but inexorably the palm wine popular street or compound music resulted in the transformation of the indigenous *odonson* music into the recitative progression of 'Akan Blues'. In this way, palm wine music became the forerunner of another musical style, the palm wine guitar band between the 1920s and 1930s. Among the exponents of this style of music were Kwame Asare (aka Jacob Sam), Kwao Mensah, Daniel Amponsah (aka Koo Nimo), Appiah Agyekum and E. K. Nyame.

Between 1920 and 1940, recordings of this highlife style were made available by Western companies like Zonophone, Columbia and Odeon. Guitar band music was more formal than the palmwine music and became more associated with the rural areas on account

of its affinity with the concert parties. In 1928, the Tarkwa Trading Corporation sent the Kumasi Trio, under the leadership of Kwame Asare, to Britain. Here, they released an album on the first Ghanaian highlife tunes for Zonophone including *Yaa Amponsah* and *Yaw Donko*, the singing style of which was in the traditional call and response form. The musical instruments used at that performance were an acoustic guitar, a wooden box (*adakam*), a drum and castanets. The accompanying rhythmic structures of these palm wine highlife tunes gradually became known as the *Amponsah* rhythm. It is based on the alternating three against two hemiola pattern and its variants as used in traditional music such as the bell line of the *agbadza* of the Ewe as illustrated in figure 1 below:

FIGURE 1



This rhythmic structure has provided the basic pattern for both the accomplished and amateur Ghanaian highlife guitarists for decades.

The recording also included tunes with *adowa* music rhythms such as *mam bebi minda* and *pen pen sin pen*, two traditional *asafo* warriors' songs – *kwame Siako* and *Akoful* – which were sung acapella in the *asafo-esi* fashion to depict the mood of warriors at the battle front. It also included a funeral song, *Me wua mɛ da dzin* (Rest in peace). The singing style of the tunes was the traditional call and response form and the musical instruments used in the performance were a box guitar, a wooden box (*adakam*), a drum and castanets.

During the Second World War, The British made use of indigenous popular music such as the *Konkoma* highlife marching songs for recruiting men to be trained as soldiers. Among the Ghanaian servicemen were concert party actors who made use of indigenous palm wine music to entertain the African troops in Burma. After the war the struggle for independence in Ghana intensified. Indigenous highlife music became one of the important indices representing the Ghanaian identity and nationalism. The post-war dance bands had influenced the palm wine musical style to the extent that in the 1950s double basses, bongos and other imported percussion instruments were added to the existing stock . Many of the palm wine guitar bands such as those of Kwaa Mensah and E. K. Nyame composed and performed pro-independence songs. Following the footsteps of E. K. Nyame , In 1951 Kwao Mensah began a prolific recording career with his formed his own guitar band and toured the country with concert parties performing comic opera until his death in 1991.

Another leading palm wine musician who came into prominence at this time was Daniel Amponsah (aka Koo Nimo). When Ghana became independent in 1957, he rose to fame through his *Addadam Agofomma* ensemble. Many of his songs follow the Akan tradition of telling *Ananse* stories. The instruments of his Ashanti ensemble consists of *apentemma* and *donno* drums, *frikyiwa* (metal castanets), the *prempensua* (rhumba box), *ntorwa* (hollow gourd rattles with beads woven round it), *nnawuta* (comprising two iron bells) together with one guitar and two vocals who sing in the Twi language the *odonson* 'Akan Blues'. Ghanaians love Amponsah's music and his devotion and admiration of tradition. Among his most loved renditions are *Odo Akosomo* and his rendition of *Yaa Amponsah* in palm wine musical style.

Indigenous Ghanaian highlife in contemporary Ghana

In the post-independence era, Highlife became a symbol of Ghana's 'nationhood'. Collins (1991: 87) informs us again that many 'national' corporations such as the Builders and Workers' Brigade, the Black Star shipping line and the Cocoa Marketing Board set up their own bands. Training schemes for musicians to learn traditional idioms were set up by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana. Among his entourage on foreign travels were some of the top highlife bands then such as the Uhuru and Ramblers dance bands. Though the popularity of the dance band has waned over the years, the guitar band appears to be active even in the 1990s but the future direction of the form is gradually becoming uncertain.

Many experiments have been made with traditional rhythms such as the *osibisa* and *adaha* of the Fanti and the *gome* of the Gã by highlife musicians. In contemporary Ghana, the experimentation has been continued by musicians like C.K. Mann and Dr. K. Gyasi. *Osoode*, a recreational music type of the Fanti has been used by Mann in his compositions as medleys. Dr. Gyasi has similarly used *sikyi* recreational traditional songs of the Akan in his *sikyi* highlife style. The themes of the *sikyi* songs centre on love and hate, hunger, poverty as well as sadness and happiness.

In an interview, the leader of the African Brothers band, Nana Kwame Ampadu told me his band which was formed in 1963 chose its name to support the efforts of President Nkrumah at African unity. The band does not use traditional instruments but introduced the hourglass (*dondo*) drum at a later stage. In a nationwide best band contest in 1972, the band used *atumpan* and *fontomfrom* drums to record the test tune, *Yaa Amponsah*. According to him, he won the title of Nana (King) because of the band's remarkable performance. The conditions of the contest included a full Ghanaian costume and introduction of more traditional musical instruments. The use of the traditional idiom

in composition is not a predominant feature of his works but he uses *adowa* rhythms occasionally as in the songs *Adowa* and *yaana me mu*. According to him, these tunes demonstrate the use of *Amponsah* rhythm in the *adowa* style. The composer has a very rare gift of putting many of his messages across by exploiting the art of traditional folklore in his compositions. This is evident in his songs such as *ebi te yie* (some are well-placed) and '*otwe agyanka*' (the orphan-duiker). In 1976, while on a visit to the United States, Nana Ampadu made a complete long play of what he termed *odaano* highlife. This is based entirely on *odaano* which is a traditional funeral music of the Kwahu, a branch of the Akan group. As a child, Ampadu was privileged to partake, watch and listen to elders at folktale sessions. He was also ever-present to observe his mother lead a band of *odaano* singers at funeral sessions. His recollection of those memories in no small way helped to shape his musical career.

The golden age of Palm wine highlife in Ghana reached its zenith in the 1950s and 1960s but the latter part of the 1960s and early 1970s saw the decline of this popular indigenous style. This was the time when Congolese music rose to fame. It was also the time when popular music from the U. S. and Europe came to dominate Ghana's music scene and palm wine highlife had given in to electronic guitar bands. The overthrow of the Nkrumah government in a coup d'état in 1966 saw many musicians moving to Nigeria, the U.S., and other European countries such as the U.K. and Germany for greener pastures. From this time onwards highlife underwent a drastic transformation with new disco-highlife styles such as reggae highlife in the 1970s, gospel and Burgher highlife styles in the 1980s and hip-hop highlife in the 1990s. Despite the decline in indigenous highlife styles, interest was rekindled in the old dance band highlife style by the Golden Nuggets, Western Diamonds, the Nat Brew NAKOREX and Rex Omar. Indigenous palm wine highlife was kept alive by artists like Daniel Amponsah who released an album of eight songs entitled *Osabarima*, the first work by a Ghanaian artist to be put on CD. Today he stands as a living legend of the indigenous Ghanaian palm wine musical style which gave and continues to give Ghana one of its great indices of cultural identity.

Conclusion

Highlife faces an uncertain future. There are attempts by the government and individuals to collect and store as much of it as possible for posterity. One such effort is the gramophone music museum at Cape Coast. This is a collection of gramophone records from all over the world majority of which are Ghanaian highlife music and indigenous songs. One aim of the museum is to help school children to appreciate the musical heritage of Ghana by teaching them how to dance to highlife and in this way help them to experience the golden age of highlife.

Many are those who think the highlife of today is a far cry from the original inspiration it gave to Ghanaians. Although Ghanaian children may enjoy hip-life of today they only know one side of the story and may misconstrue it to mean the whole story. Cross-cultural links between the highlife and other musical forms such as the calypso and blues is very important but the degree to which highlife is being influenced by 'new' musical idioms is becoming a matter for concern. Idioms used in palm wine highlife such as the 'call and response' and rhythmic structures have links with the idioms used in indigenous Ghanaian music. The Ghanaian society owes it a duty to pass on such indigenous knowledge to generations unborn.

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