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## THE LINGUISTIC AND POETIC ANALYSIS OF GA TRADITIONAL MUSIC

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### Abstract

*Traditional music practices and idioms continue to shape the creative processes of Ghanaian composers, serving as foundational materials for new compositions and performance styles. However, despite the rich linguistic and poetic qualities of Ga traditional music, limited scholarly attention has been given to how lyrics are structured, rhythmically organised, and integrated into melodic compositions. The absence of comprehensive studies on these elements creates a gap in understanding the techniques that influence text-setting in Ga traditional vocal music. In this regard, the study examines the lyrical content of selected Ga traditional songs, focusing on their linguistic and poetic elements. Data collection involved recordings and musical transcriptions of Ga traditional songs, which were analysed to explore how composers set text to melody, the impact of rhythm on lyrics, the structural and formal characteristics of the lyrics and the cultural imagery they convey. Findings reveal that Ga composers employ intricate rhythmic patterns that influence textual phrasing, and their lyrical structures often reflect oral traditions, storytelling, and cultural symbolism. The study also highlights poetic devices and linguistic techniques that enhance meaning, emotional expression, and cultural identity in traditional music. This research provides insights into how traditional text-setting techniques can inform modern compositional and arrangement practices.*

**Keywords:** Ga, poetic analysis, text-setting, oral traditions, cultural imagery.

### 1. Introduction

This study highlights poetic devices and text-setting techniques found in traditional Ga music. The discussion is put under sections to aid in the sequential presentation of ideas, concepts and findings. This section, the introduction, apart from discussing in general the influence and impact of traditional music on the Ghanaian music landscape, also discusses why traditional music remains relevant today. Performances of Ga traditional music often take place during social activities like festivals, celebrations and communal gatherings (Abarry, 1984). These social activities comprise funerals, weddings and events that usually involve the participation of more than one person. Matczynski (2022) also highlights how Ga music is intertwined with cultural practices, rituals and social structures despite urbanisation and economic pressures, cultural erosion and language loss and religious conflicts. It should be noted

that, although national politics, goals and visions continue to change and impact our culture, certain aspects continue to thrive, and this is evident in events such as *Chale Wote* which is centred on promoting Ga culture.

According to Maclean and Acquah (2024) music is influenced by historical events, tradition and folklore. Then by extension, Ga traditional music, like musical traditions from other ethnic groups, does not only entertain communities but also influences the preservation and transmission of Ga culture because of the elements and concepts they contain. Hampton (1978) corroborates assertions made above by pointing out how traditional music reflects historical interactions, events and demonstrates how cultural practices are modified or changed over time. In summary, the performance of traditional music, according to Hampton (1978) ensures that cultural traditions are preserved and passed down from one generation to another.

On the other hand, composers and music theorists have also explored the use of traditional music elements as pre-composition materials. Mensah (1959) corroborates this assertion by stating that there are Ghanaian musical styles that were developed through a fusion of traditional music procedures and European music practices. examples of these styles include highlife, Ebibidwom and Ghanaian Art music. There are scholarly writings by Agyekum et al. (2020), Acquah et al. (2015), Acquah and Sackey (2021), and Maclean and Acquah (2024) exploring poetic and linguistic attributes in traditional music; however, these do not focus on Ga traditional music. This paper examines how Ga traditional music composers creatively combine text and music in their music. In addition, this study also examines how these elements are used in promoting and preserving culture.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Artistic Semiotics**

Semiotics is concerned with how signs such as words or symbols affect human life and social interactions (Pristianingrum & Damayanti, 2022). According to Eco (1979), music comprises signs that convey meaning through its structure, connotation and cultural context. Therefore, music semiotics examines how music communicates and how it fits broader systems of signification and culture. Hatten (2005) affirms the notion that these musical signs are combined to form new figurative meanings just like metaphors. It also provides tools to examine how artistic works function as complex sign systems with aesthetic meaning (Feshchenko, 2023). However, Feshchenko (2023) states that artistic symbols, unlike utilitarian signs that primarily convey practical information, create artistic experiences. Hatten (2005) further explains that music is iconic when it imitates reality through similar properties or structures. A practical example of this is when pitches are arranged in a descending order with the text *falling down*. This arrangement enhances the meaning since the text, *falling down* together with the music (descending pitches), describes the event better. Another aspect to consider in semiotics is index, which Hatten (2005) explains as using a dynamic or temporal connection to communicate. For instance, abrupt changes in volume or tempo may be used to represent dramatic events or an emotional shift. Signs and symbols, in this case music, may also be symbolic because they represent conventions of a particular music style (Hatten, 2005). Feshchenko (2023), in support of this, states that words are not used in poetry for their literal meaning alone but also for their sound, rhythm and imagery.

### **2.2 Phraseology**

Nketia (2002) states that phraseology could be used to examine how language interacts with music in African traditional music. Phraseology is concerned with how rhythm, meaning and aesthetic appeal are created with syllables, words and musical motifs (Nketia 2002). What informs this theory is the fact that African traditional musicians, according to Nketia (2002), create song texts, rhythm, and motifs simultaneously. This implies that the arrangement of pitches to create motifs, phrases, and verses is dependent on the texts and lyrics that composers intend to use. So that rather than attaching lyrics to a created tune or a melody or vice versa, traditional musicians compose a melody with lyrics already attached. The reason behind this compositional practice, according to Nketia (2002) is that African languages are tone languages and bear syllables with three tone levels (low, mid and high).

### 3. Review of Related Literature

#### 3.1 Ga songs

The inclusion of traditional music in social and communal functions fosters unity and maintains social cohesion in addition to providing the platform for honouring ancestors and sacred artefacts that, according to Hampton (1978), attempt to link physical and spiritual worlds. In addition to this, Matczynski (2022) also mentions aspects that have revitalised and promoted traditional Ga music, like technology, cultural advocacy and local infrastructures. These emphasise the importance of Ga traditional music to the Ga people, scholars and cultural enthusiasts.

According to Abarry (1984), in Ga culture, songs are poems and poems are also songs, and both emphasise the use of creative language which stems from skill and artistry. Nketia (1958) holds a similar view and states that there is an interconnectedness between music, poetry and performance, which are emphasised in Ga oral traditions. Themes of Ga songs highlight laurels acquired by heroes, provide social education or awareness of present events and political issues that affect the community (Abarry, 1984; Nketia, 1958). For instance, songs are used to condemn social evils and promote virtues, which are recurring themes in traditional music (Nketia, 1958). Abarry (1984) adds that singing groups usually comprise a lead singer and a chorus who are described as semi-professionals. Nketia (1958) observed that Ga songs are usually structured in verses and performed using the call-and-response or cantor and chorus form. Although Ga songs use the pentatonic and heptatonic scales, Nketia (1958) states that the latter features more than the former because of musical interactions between the Ga and Akan people.

The assertion is corroborated by Abarry (1984), Hampton (1978) and Matczynski (2022), who capture Adowa, Asafo and Obonu as examples of music styles created by the Ga people that incorporate Akan and Akwamu traditional music practices. Nketia (1958) notes that song text may be monolingual, bilingual or multilingual, thereby allowing the composer to transmit ideas using a wide range of linguistic and cultural resources for greater emotional and rhetorical impact. Furthermore, such interactions provide an opportunity for experimenting with a variety of musical devices such as rhythmic patterns, call-and-response devices, repetitions, form and tonal variations (Abarry, 1984). According to Abarry (1984) Nonsensical words like *ko-lo-lon* and *si-ge-len* and addressives like “*ee*” and “*oo*” are also common compositional devices found in Ga traditional songs. These are perfect for laying emphasis on certain ideas presented in the song or providing cues linking preceding words to succeeding words. These, according to Abarry (1984), are used for their emotional, tonal and rhythmic effect and feature in the song as decorations or ornamentation. In African traditional music, the end of phrases is, according to Ekwueme (1980) and Nketia (2002), marked by the prolongation of durations of text or lyrics using vocables or epithets. These are similar to what Abarry (1984) describes as nonsensical words, which adds another compositional function to this traditional music element.

#### 3.2 Poetic and Linguistic Devices in Song texts

The symbiosis of poetic texts and musical elements, according to Maclean and Acquah (2024), reinforces themes or messages that are intended by composers to be communicated to an audience. Acquah et al. (2015) propose a framework that integrates musical sound (pitch and rhythm), text (poetry) and performance for creating meaningful and impactful music as well as enhancing clarity, coherence and emotional resonance. The messages carried across by these elements, according to Maclean and Acquah (2024), allow songs to be used as a conduit to pass on knowledge and information pertaining to culture.

Poetic organisation found in songs includes the use of symbolism and imagery, repetition and emphasis, metaphor and allegory, while sonic elements, proverbs and idioms are examples of linguistic organisation found in songs (Maclean & Acquah, 2024). Consonance, alliteration and personification are also examples of literary devices identified by Agyekum et al. (2020) that are used to make songs more engaging and memorable. These represent various elements derived from traditional music that communicate clearly the ideas of a composer to an intended audience (Agyekum et al., 2020). The use of logical structures like sentential cohesion and contextual clarity allows listeners to understand the ideas, concepts, and themes from which song texts are developed (Acquah et al., 2015). Implying that

a composer's ideas are effectively communicated when song texts are devoid of ambiguities; however, it may also be the intent of the composer to allow for varied interpretation of themes and ideas because of dynamism and individuality. Whatever the intent may be for composing a song text, Acquah et al. (2015) emphasise that clear semantic considerations, in addition to logical text structures, are essential for effectively communicating with listeners.

Agyekum et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of using proverbs, a traditional poetic device, in songs because of their ability to effectively communicate wisdom, caution, and life lessons that are based on cultural experiences. Abarry (1984) adds that proverbs are one of the main poetic and literary devices used in Ga traditional music because they serve as nourishment for the Ga language. Proverbs, apart from facilitating the transfer of ideas to listeners, also aid composers in simplifying complex themes by allowing the use of vivid imagery and metaphors that resonate with listeners (Amuah & Wuaku, 2019). According to Nketia (2002), the creation of music drawing on the verbal styles and stock expressions such as epithets and proverbs and creative practices established in a particular community is typical of African traditional music composers. It should be noted that the use of figurative expressions like proverbs by a composer is an indication of knowledge or an in-depth understanding of issues pertaining to life and tradition—a characteristic or trait necessary for all Ga traditional music composers.

#### 4. Method

This study analyses two Ga traditional songs that were sampled purposively because their themes focused on real-life experiences and real social issues affecting Ga communities. These Ga traditional songs were collected from 5 traditional musicians from Teshie. They were also sampled using purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Availability of these musicians was a factor and the location of these musicians was also a factor. Some musicians were not considered because they offered to meet at locations the researcher found not conducive to data collection. Teshie was preferred to other Ga communities because the resource person had access to traditional musicians from Teshie and, as such, could facilitate interview sessions. The analysis highlights poetic and linguistic devices captured in Ga traditional songs that were transcribed from audio recordings to text. In addition to this, the analysis also examines the relationship between the text and musical elements like rhythm and melody after transcribing sonic aspects into staff notation. The creative ideas and processes of these traditional musicians that influence how text is set to music in the selection of traditional music is also highlighted.

All recordings of creative material were approved by respondents after their role in the study was explained. Additionally, respondents reviewed audio recordings and transcriptions before they were added to the study.

#### 5. Results and Findings

##### 5.1 Transcription and English Translation of Song Texts

###### Sa Lala

*Mi be mi nyemie yitso mliṇ*  
*Mi be ejweṇ mɔ mliṇ*  
*Mi ke le ye shia daa*  
*Asumuaa ehe mliṇ tsẽ mi*

###### Chorus

I am not in my sibling's head  
 I am not in his mind  
 We live at home together  
 Yet my sibling envies me

###### Mliṇ Jaa

*Nke le gbaa sane*  
*Nke le wɔɔ tsu mliṇ*  
*Nke le yeɔ nin daa*  
*Asumuaa ehe mliṇ tsẽ mi*  
*Yehowa Nyɔ̃mɔ adawro ma*  
*Le eha ni mi le ake*  
*Mi nyemie ehe mliṇ tsẽ mi*

###### Verse

I converse with my sibling  
 We share a room together  
 We eat together  
 Yet my sibling envies me  
 Because of God's grace  
 I am now aware  
 That my sibling envies me

The text describes how siblings may be envious of each other even though they have a close relationship or bond. The nature of this bond is described by how the siblings eat together, share their thoughts in

conversation and even share a room together. These lyrics provide a vivid cultural imagery of how sibling relationships are perceived by the Ga community. The lyrics also highlight how the supernatural intervenes in matters that are beyond human control, particularly other people's opinions and perceptions. This is also synonymous with the Ga culture because there is a belief in the supernatural and the interaction of the supernatural and the natural. This is supported by Hampton (1978), who mentions how Ga traditional music is a conduit for honouring the supernatural.

#### **Akan Lyrics (Chorus)**

*Mempe meho asem oo, mempe meho asem oo*  
*Mete ho ee, mempe meho asem oo*  
*Men kafa asem na manya asem oo*  
*Mete ho ee, mempe meho asem oo*

#### **English Translation (Chorus)**

I do not want any trouble  
 As I sit here, I do not want any problems  
 Do not involve me in any of your problems  
 I do not want any trouble

#### **Mlij Jaa**

*Enɛ le kɛ osumɔ ni okɔ oo*  
*Hie mɛi le ake jen naa*  
*Mi bi kɔ nnaa, kɛ osumɔ koni okɔ*  
*(ɛii mi bi le) Nɔni mi kɛɔ bo le min ha ni ole*  
*Ake mɛi enyɔ ajinaa*  
*Mɛi etɛ le ee*  
*Nɔni ji etɛ nɔ, ni ebaa le ee*  
  
*Le ebaa hani anu he ee.*

#### **Verse**

You can choose to listen to my advice  
 The worldly do not know there is night (death)  
 My child, you can choose to listen to my advice  
 My child, I want to be in the know  
 What is agreed upon by two people in secrecy  
 Is not privy to a third person  
 The third person will eventually expose your  
 secret eventually to others  
 He will spread your secrets to all

The poetic text above portrays a character or individual who actively avoids conflict and maintains a peaceful stance. This description is stated in the opening chorus, which is in the Twi dialect, confirming the intercultural character of Ga traditional music. Abarry (1984), Hampton (1978), Matczynski (2022), and Nketia (1958) corroborate this contention by stating that there is a tradition of bilingualism or multilingualism in Ga communities, especially amongst musicians who strive to perpetuate the tradition of singing by fusing both Akan and Ga dialects no matter the imperfections in pronouncing Twi or Fante words. Additionally, Ga communities, because they are found in the nation's capital, Accra, are cosmopolitan; therefore, the use of multiple languages extends the reach of the composer's message.

The individual in question goes on in the verse to advise the younger generation, inferring that the speaker is elderly, that when two people make a decision in secret, it is the third person or party that goes to divulge what was agreed upon to the public. In summary, the advice or wise saying is not forcefully imparted to the listener, but rather the listener is encouraged to decide on adhering to the proverb or otherwise. The figurative expression helps the simple take on a more complex design and pushes the limits of comprehension and interpretation of the listener, as no names or direct descriptions of the subject of discussion are given. This perspective is similar to those expressed by Agyekum et al. (2020), Amuah and Wuaku (2019), and Nketia (2002), who emphasise how proverbs enhance communication in traditional music. Proverbs provide variables that listeners can interchange for any individual or individuals at their discretion. The lyrics' anonymity and lack of focus on the characters allow the listener to focus on the message. This is usually the practice or structure used in Ga proverbs.

When these expressions are used in communication, they imbue the message with an invaluable value, akin to the rarity of knowledge or a precious stone, ensuring only those with ears can hear it. It also serves as a buffer to the musicians, as it reduces attacks from influential people, especially chiefs, as no names are attributed to these expressions; whoever feels offended by them will find it tough to implicate the musicians. The use of proverbs in Ga traditional music is symbolic because, according to Hatten (2005), they represent conventions of a particular music style (Hatten, 2005). Furthermore, Feshchenko (2023) asserts that the lyrics' construction communicates imagery, enabling them to transcend their literal meanings.

## 5.2 Structure of Ga traditional songs

### 5.2.1 Form

The arrangement of both songs is such that it opens with a chorus (*Sa Lala*) and is then followed by a verse (*Mlin Jaa*). This form may be extended so that the verses are more than one; however, all verses are preceded by a chorus that remains the same. Regardless of the arrangement, the songs always conclude with the same chorus. This makes Ga traditional songs easy to remember, thereby facilitating audience or listener participation. The transcribed song texts above follow this format. The form described in the transcribed song texts is similar to the strophic form used in hymn and popular music compositions.

### 5.2.2 Melodic Organisation

The melodic organisation of both songs is influenced by the text-tune relationship, which impacts scales, modes and rhythmic structures that are used in composition. This view is similar to the view of Nketia (2002), who describes the traditional African composer as one who is able to conceive text or lyrics and the tune simultaneously. This characteristic resembles the creative processes employed by Ga traditional musicians, whose melodies closely align with the nuances of the spoken Ga language, allowing the audience to relate better to what they hear. This ideology may explain why both poems and songs are referred to as *lala* (song) in Ga.

### 5.2.3 Rhythm

The rhythmic pattern of both songs comprises a mixture of short and long durations, all of which are subdivisions of a steady compound duple pulse. The rhythmic patterns created are influenced by the song text. In addition, the syllables of each word also impact the rhythmic pattern so that the number of syllables contained in a particular word directly affects the number of beats given to the word. The excerpt in Figure 1 shows how the word *minpe* in measure 6 is split into two pitches with two durations, one being longer than the other. The reason for this split is that *minpe* has two syllables, that is, *min* and *pe*.



Figure 1: Excerpt of rhythmic pattern

Traditional musicians borrow these techniques from the Ga language. Apart from influencing the rhythmic pattern of a melody, the text-tune relationship also influences the pitch levels of each lyric or syllabic unit so that high, middle, and low speech tones are represented. As seen from figure 1, there are different pitch levels due to intonations evident in the spoken Ga language. The constant relation of musical language to spoken language indicates a conscious effort on the part of traditional musicians to preserve aspects of their culture or perpetuate cultural values in their music, particularly the language of their people.

### 5.2.4 Use of Ad libs

There are elements that are not conceived during the composition process; however, traditional musicians incorporate them during performances. These ad libs include addressives and nonsensical words and are used to enhance singing. Addressives are used by the cantor to cue in the chorus, either in terms of tonality or rhythm. The cantor's pitch is maintained using the addressive, and the same is what the chorus uses as a reference for their response to the cantor's call. Secondly, by maintaining the

rhythmic structure of the entire song or ensuring that lyrics are sung in time, the cantor's use of an addressive sustains the overall pulse, and the chorus enters appropriately, using that as a reference point.



Figure 2: Excerpt showing the use of addressives

The first phrase, from measure 1, from figure 2, ends with the first note in the third measure. This note is equivalent to a dotted crotchet in duration and a vocable or addressive “ee” attached to the syllable *mi* (making *miee*). The second phrase of this melody, beginning with the second note in measure 3, also ends with a minim beat. The phrase also has a syllable attached to a vowel “oo” in the fourth measure. However, there is another vowel “ee” allotted to another pitch in the same measure succeeding the minim duration, whose duration overlaps into the fifth measure. Comparing the two phrase end markings, the second marker, which goes from measure four to measure five, shows a stronger feeling of completion, similar to what we call a perfect cadence in Western music theory. Thus, the first phrase, from measure one to three, poses a question that is answered by the second phrase, ending on the first crotchet beat in measure five.

The nonsensical words are generally used to “spice up” songs that do not have percussive accompaniment or a limited form of accompaniment, like stomping of feet or clapping of hands. Nonsensical words mimic percussive instruments that feature in Ga traditional ensembles, particularly the recreational forms or genres (*Kpanlogo* and *Kolomashie*). These nonsensical words may be simple or short rhythmic forms that are found in the *noŋo* repertory, which are mostly ostinato, or complex rhythmic forms found in *obonu*, *gome* and *kpanlogo* drum language.

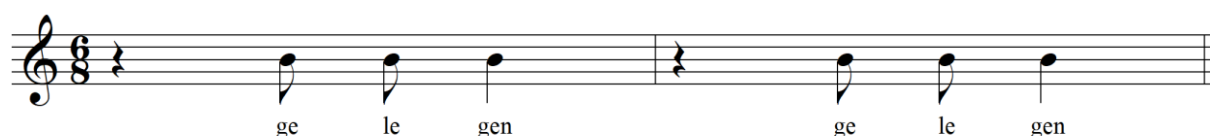


Figure 3: Excerpt showing nonsensical words

Apart from providing percussive accompaniment to the vocal rendition, nonsensical words also act as a countermelody to the main melody, especially during the rendition of the cantor's call. The contrapuntal outcome in singing nonsensical words alongside the cantor's call produces a design or form that is similar to an ensemble that uses both vocal and instrumental media, which makes a simple call-and-response structure intriguing and exciting. The fact that these “auxiliary” texts are not included by the composer in their original work but are born out of a tradition of extemporisation indicates the sort of musical vocabulary one must possess as a traditional musician.

### 5.2.5 Harmony

Harmonic progressions for both songs were constructed with reference to a key centre that supported the melody and phrasing. This implies that the text-tune relationship also influences harmony in Ga songs. Procedures in harmony are developed through apprenticeship and creativity and are passed down using oral tradition. The creative ideas that traditional Ga musicians develop with regard to the use of harmony are influenced by being exposed to other music genres like highlife, hiplife and art music. These other musical genres are featured in events organised by the church, pubs and other social programmes.

## 6. Conclusion

Results indicate a close relationship between music and language in Ga traditional songs. This relationship influences the creative use of musical elements such as melody, rhythm, and phrasing in composition. Furthermore, the lyrical content of songs closely aligns with speech characteristics that are synonymous with Ga culture. The similarity of speech and lyrics allows for effective communication



between musicians and their audience so that themes and ideas in Ga songs are impactful. Composers could explore applying text–tune relationships not only in the shaping of melody, rhythm, and harmonic elements in musical composition but also at the precompositional stage, where musical ideas are conceived. This approach would allow composers to generate material more easily, thereby increasing their repertoire.

Apart from this, Ga songs also use ideas from storytelling in crafting lyrical content, especially in the creation of characters who speak to societal issues. These characters may be wise men, the elderly, or imagined roles. Ga songs always incorporate moral lessons, a characteristic of storytelling tradition. The performance practice of singing Ga songs also includes the interaction of two groups of people who take on the roles of a storyteller (cantor) and a participating audience (chorus). These interactions enhance the performance, particularly in terms of communication. Composers and ethnomusicologists may generate new frameworks, theories and performance practices by exploring storytelling and film. Examining storytelling practices in oral tradition and film can also uncover creative ideas such as motifs, themes, and performance practice concepts.

Furthermore, the use of figurative expressions represents a complexity and a sophistication that is not common in everyday speech. The Ga cultural values and traditions that govern linguistic excellence must therefore be understood and mastered in order to use such expressions in songs. These qualities also make Ga traditional songs suitable for transferring and sharing aspects of Ga culture that need to be sustained and promoted to enhance cultural ties and bonds. Finally, composers and ethnomusicologists may explore ways to preserve and promote culture using ideas from traditional music. For instance, Ga traditional songs use poetry and storytelling to preserve and promote the values and concepts of Ga culture.

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