

# LA MÚSICA ENTRE ÁFRICA Y AMÉRICA

A MÚSICA ENTRE ÁFRICA E AMÉRICA  
MUSIC BETWEEN AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS

COORDINADOR: CORIÚN AHARONIÁN

**CDM**

CENTRO NACIONAL DE DOCUMENTACIÓN MUSICAL  
LAURO AYESTARÁN

**mec**  
MINISTERIO DE EDUCACIÓN Y CULTURA

MONTEVIDEO  
2013

## Condiciones de uso

1. El contenido de este documento electrónico, accesible en el sitio del *Centro Nacional de Documentación Musical Lauro Ayestarán*, CDM (Montevideo, Uruguay), es una publicación del propio CDM, proveniente de su labor de investigación o de un evento organizado por él.

2. Su uso se inscribe en el marco de la ley n° 9.739 del 17 de diciembre de 1937, modificada por la Ley n° 17.616 del 10 de enero de 2003:

- el uso no comercial de sus contenidos es libre y gratuito en el respeto de la legislación vigente, y en particular de la mención de la fuente.

- el uso comercial de sus contenidos está sometido a un acuerdo escrito que se deberá pedir al CDM. Se entiende por uso comercial la venta de sus contenidos en forma de productos elaborados o de servicios, sea total o parcial. En todos casos se deberá mantener la mención de la fuente y el derecho de autor.

3. Los documentos del sitio del CDM son propiedad del Centro Nacional de Documentación Musical Lauro Ayestarán, salvo

mención contraria, en los términos definidos por la ley.

4. Las condiciones de uso de los contenidos del sitio del CDM son reguladas por la ley uruguaya. En caso de uso no comercial o comercial en otro país, corresponde al usuario la responsabilidad de verificar la conformidad de su proyecto con la ley de ese país.

5. El usuario se compromete a respetar las presentes condiciones de uso así como la legislación vigente, en particular en cuanto a la propiedad intelectual. En caso de no respeto de estas disposiciones, el usuario será pasible de lo previsto por la Ley n° 9.739 y su modificación por la Ley n° 17.616 del 10 de enero de 2003.

## CDM

Centro Nacional de Documentación Musical Lauro Ayestarán

[www.cdm.gub.uy](http://www.cdm.gub.uy)

correo electrónico: [info@cdm.gub.uy](mailto:info@cdm.gub.uy)

1ª edición, 2013.

Edición digital, 2014.

© 2013, Centro Nacional de Documentación Musical Lauro Ayestarán.

© 2013, los autores.

Impreso en el Uruguay.

ISBN 978-9974-36-231-4 (edición impresa)

Centro Nacional de Documentación Musical Lauro Ayestarán

Avenida Luis P. Ponce 1347 / 505 - 11300 Montevideo, Uruguay. Teléfono +598 27099494.

## **Versión multimedia**

Esta versión del artículo incluye los elementos multimedia presentados en anexos del libro en un CD.

Las pistas de audio han sido insertadas en el documento PDF en el lugar indicado en el texto ("Musical example 1", etc.), donde aparecerá el cursor bajo la forma de una mano. Haciendo click sobre el título del ejemplo, se reproduce la pista de audio.

## ***Requerimientos de software***

Para aprovechar de los elementos multimedia, se necesita usar una versión de Adobe Player posterior a la versión 7.1, que se descarga gratuitamente de Internet, o cualquier otro reproductor de PDF que soporte los elementos multimedia incluidos en los documentos. Configurar el programa para su sistema.

## EXPLORING THE CREATIVE POTENTIAL OF OUR ANCESTRAL LEGACY

### Introduction

When I received your kind invitation to participate in your seminar, I was delighted by the prospect of meeting not only colleagues in Ethnomusicology and related fields but also New World exponents of varieties of so-called African derived music I had experienced in the US, the Caribbean as well as Brazil and Venezuela. It is a great pleasure therefore, to be here in Uruguay at this stage in my life when I am close to winding up.

Since the documentation of ethnographic evidence of African continuities in the New World now abounds, it seemed to me as I thought about the topic of my address that what I should share with you at the present stage of our knowledge is not a rehash of my paper on “African Roots of Music in the Americas” which I was privileged to present in 1977 at the Twelfth congress of the International Musicological Society held at Berkeley <sup>1</sup> which you can read at your leisure, but Exploring The Creative Potential Of Our Ancestral Legacy.

I do not mean of course that pursuing the subject of roots and acculturation in the Americas should be laid to rest, for the ethnographic insights it offers continues to be relevant as the problem of Music and

---

1 International Musicological Society: *Report of the Twelfth Congress*, Berkeley, 1977, edited by Daniel Heartz and Bonnie Wade, Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1981: 82-88. See also 1990: Holloway, Joseph E., ed.: *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, especially paper on “Africanisms in African American Music” by Portia K. Maultsby.



Ethnicity in the Americas and repercussions of African – derived music in Africa engage scholarly attention. What seems to me to have received scant attention thus far is the outcome of the response of Africa itself to the parallel but equally important impact of Colonial and Missionary intervention in Africa, which forbade Christian converts from participating in the indigenous musical traditions and cultural practices of their ethnic communities while simultaneously institutionalising western music in church and school and conniving at the practice of western entertainment music in colonialist and mercantilist quarters.

The irony of it all was that although this intervention sidelined the practice of traditional music, it paved the way for the development of new contexts and modes of music making – one following the trail of church music and its art music correlates, and the other “entertainment” music leading to the emergence of local variants of popular music such as the West African Highlife and Congolese music as well as the cultivation and rapid growth of variants of specific New World creative models in contemporary contexts, a process that now seems irreversible.

Hence the new creative response to our Ancestral legacy in post colonial Africa itself precipitated by the attainment of independence from colonial rule raises challenges that are worthy of note, considering the fact that unlike the situation in the Americas, the musical traditions that embody African roots of music are still alive in most of their original locations in Africa itself, and therefore, present a different set of problems, namely the need for rediscovering, activating, sustaining, or transforming them in different *contemporary* contexts.

It is because of these problems and the fact that Africa itself is currently also a recipient of New World transformations of our Ancestral legacy or African roots that combining the scholarly *study* of African traditions with their creative exploration in contemporary contexts of application has been my life-long preoccupation, an approach that would not have occurred to me if my sensibility for this had not been aroused very early as I grew up by a break – through in church music when a Ghanaian music educator and composer dared in the 1920s to challenge the status quo and so paved the way for the development of a creative synthesis that gives traditional resources free rein because of their role as markers of identity.

It is this particular transformation and the processes that led to it which highlight at once the problematic of Ethnicity, Music and Creative Exploration of Ancestral Legacy that I would like to share with you from my own experience of the situation in Ghana – a situation which called for

- (a) Re-contextualising ethnic traditions in contemporary contexts necessitated by colonial and missionary intervention and constraints, and
- (b) Creating new forms of *Intercultural Music* that combine indigenous materials and the legacy of colonial (western) resources for performance in contemporary *African* contexts.

Both of these approaches, which call not only for creative imagination but also, on a higher level, for systematized knowledge of our Ancestral Legacy, are fast becoming a sine qua non for composers and music makers in our post colonial era. Hence I wish I had added in parenthesis to my topic “How I became an Ethnomusicologist” in response to these challenges.

### **Coexistence of the old and the new**

Unlike the situation in the Americas where carriers of African traditions had the freedom to retain, nurture, alter or integrate elements of their new cultural and musical environment into their own systems, early missionary and colonial intervention in Africa left little or no leeway for this. African converts of Christian churches were deliberately segregated from their communities wherever possible or enjoined not to participate in customary rites, music and dancing in order to ensure that they did not go back to their traditional beliefs and modes of worship, while the Colonial Government which planted its own political and cultural institutions in its territory discreetly took a more liberal stand when they gained a firm footing and adopted a system of Indirect Rule which allowed traditional Chiefs and their people who were non-Christian to maintain their social, political and cultural systems, except customary practices they also thought might breach the peace in the areas where they had installed their own juridical systems and bureaucracies with a cadre of district Officers and Commissioners.

The establishment of the western system of education and Christianity – which gained a firm footing as a major agent of acculturation – resulted in the steady growth of a sizeable population of literates and non-literates who were partially or fully estranged by the western way of life into which they were plunged, and who operated in non-traditional contexts – contexts of foreign or new institutions and organisations in which linkages beyond ethnicity such as membership of churches and schools, trade unions professional associations etc formed the basis of social life, while the vast majority of the population remained in their traditional environment.

What was significant for all was the fact that this divide did not hinder recruitment of local labour or the promotion of agrarian, mercantile and related activities. Indeed nothing prevented a few plucky non-literates and non-Christians here and there from taking advantage of whatever became handy, including western instruments of adoption like the guitar and accordion, and so forth to accompany or make their own music in their own locations outside regular community contexts.

Such was the magnitude of the social and cultural change that gradually emerged because of this liberal policy that growing up in Ghana became a “duo” for some of us. I had one foot in my own traditional society and culture all my life, while the other foot was in the European (colonial cum missionary) system, which had become part and parcel of cultural life of literates and non-literate Christians in our communities.

This duality however, was in some respects not a handicap for those of us who did not miss going through the traditional process of enculturation, – the process that enables the individual to acquire his knowledge and experience of music making in his traditional community gradually through early exposure to it and participation in it as he grows up. As Providence would have it, at the age of seven, my non-literate non-Christian parents who reared me in this traditional way decided that in addition to what I gained from my non-literate community, I also should go to school like the other children who belonged to Christian families. They were able to get me enrolled without hitch through my non-literate Christian grand parents, so I was able to complete my basic school education in my hometown in Ashanti (the middle region of Ghana) and

thereafter gain admission into the Presbyterian Teacher Training College at Akropong in Akwapim situated in Southern Ghana.

One of the reasons why I was keen on going to that particular College was the fascination I had when students from that institution came on vacation to my hometown. They not only looked smart and spruce but also now and then performed their “College music” in church, which included new music composed in some sort of new African idiom and accompanied them on a harmonium. It was apparent that a fusion of the western songs we learnt in school and the traditional songs performed in our communities had begun.

I learned later that it was Ephraim Amu (born on September 13, 1899) in the Volta Region of Ghana) who was a Tutor at the Presbyterian Training College at Akropong in 1926 who composed the songs in the 1930s, and that going back to his ancestral legacy had led to a change in his orientation – to the awakening of consciousness of his African identity and a resolve to change the status quo of missionary hegemony.

### **Breaking the stranglehold of acculturation**

The circumstance that precipitated Amu’s return to his ancestral legacy was a very simple pedagogical issue which had not occurred to him but which was brought to his attention at the Presbyterian Training College where he was a Tutor in music. As he himself told me, it all began when the Principal of the Training College who was a Scotsman and not a Ghanaian called him one day and asked him “Why aren’t you teaching the students some of the songs I hear the labourers on our campus sing when they are working?”

This puzzled him, for it had never occurred to him that this was the proper thing to do as the College music syllabus did not include that kind of music. So he went to listen to the songs and as he was literate in Western music theory, which was a compulsory subject for all students at the College, he tried to notate the songs he heard but found them difficult to notate because of their somewhat “complex” rhythms. This led him not only to go back and figure them out but also to go to his own traditional area and learn some traditional songs so that he could

include such African songs and “Exercises in African rhythm” in his music syllabus.

As he was a literate composer in the western church tradition, he tried to use what he had discovered about the “rudiments” of music in African songs from the traditional people in his hometown and elsewhere in writing new church anthems and patriotic songs, making use of what he had learnt. He modified the style in such a way that it would be acceptable to the Church. Accordingly he adopted the four part Western hymn style but modified it in such a way as to allow for the characteristic features of traditional songs to be replicated, such as the use of call and response as a structural and performance strategy, the heptatonic scale in common use in the songs of the Akan and his own Northern Ewe Ethnic group, basic principles of voice separation in traditional songs that employ the heptatonic, including the use of parallel thirds, and adherence to the correlation between the intonation and rhythm of speech texts defined by the duration and tones of the words and those of the contour of the melody and rhythm of his songs, and so forth. I shall return to this later.

This focus on the fundamentals of his musical culture now made him so conscious of his African identity that he became a rebel. He started to modify his own life style by wearing African attire of his own design instead of western clothing, and to form the habit of speaking and writing his own language instead of English where the situation did not preclude it. These and other adaptations worked very well until one day the Church became incensed when his “Africanisms” led him to disobey its dress code for those who preach in the pulpit. He insisted on wearing African attire instead of European clothes, so this led to his immediate dismissal.

Amu was immediately picked up by a Government Secondary School and Training College. Two years later he was awarded scholarship to go to London to study for the three-year Diploma in Music Theory at the Royal College of Music. He accepted this offer because he had resolved that he was not going there to become a copycat. He was prepared to face the new creative challenges that would come his way as he reflected on his own traditions, for as he pointed out in an interview in a West African magazine on his return to Ghana, going through the discipline of western music in London, “enabled him to think about his own culture *with a new mind*.”

Although I did not meet Amu when I gained admission to the four-year Teacher Training course at Akropong in 1937 and took an additional one-year Theological course in the seminary attached to the College, I benefited from his successor Robert O. Danso, who fortunately continued with the innovation in Amu's music syllabus. He was however, not plucky enough to continue the extracurricular activities like drumming and dancing etc which the Church had begun to frown upon. He maintained the Church "Singing Band" or choir, which sang Amu's compositions and his own during church service, a tradition I followed when I became his Assistant.

I learned not only what Amu passed on to Robert Danso when he took over from him but also his own construction of it. I deputised for him, played the harmonium in Church when he could not attend himself, made copies of his music for him because he was also a composer who had developed his personal style that I appreciated and tried to adapt for myself. Accordingly I was appointed Tutor in music at the College when he also resigned to undertake Theological training to become a Minister of the Gospel.

### **Learning traditional music from custodians of tradition**

It was when Amu returned to Ghana from the Royal College of Music in London in 1944 that I met him personally. He looked out for me when he paid a courtesy visit to our Training College because he had heard of my work at the College through his nephew who was also a member of the staff of the College and was pleased that I was continuing from where he left off. At a morning service he attended at the College on the day he visited the campus, he dashed to where I was (because he saw me playing the harmonium during the service) and said to me: "Young man, I gather you are interested in music." So I said: "Yes!" beaming with a smile. Then he said: "Don't copy my music! Go to the traditional people and learn from them because this is how I came to create my music." He cited a few musicians who had copied his style, including my own teacher who succeeded him, so I took him seriously.

Accordingly I arranged to go back to my hometown to learn from the traditional people – from one of the cousins of my grandmother whom I

also addressed as *grandmother* according to our African custom but who was the leader of the *Adowa* performing group, which has a large repertoire of songs. She agreed to teach me those songs, so I went back to her with a notebook and a pencil in my hand. She guessed immediately that I would be writing down the texts of the songs she would sing, so she taught me just five or six at a time each day so she could “think about” the next batch before she went to bed and recall them for our meeting in the morning.

Her method was quite unique, for she was both non-literate and non-Christian. She would sing a song once right through, and then sing it as it were “line by line” for me to write it down. And at the end of it, she would say “Read it to me!” She would check if I had written down some texts wrongly or if there were words I would not understand. And then, after that, we would sing the song together.

After we sang two or three songs in this manner, she began to tell me about the structure. “This part of the song is the call (*oɸr f*).” She would sing it. “This part is the response (*nnyeso*). So if I sing this call, (sings the call) remember the response is coming.” She pointed out also that when the chorus responds, she could interrupt them by singing something else. As soon as she does so they stop singing until she finishes her interruption and then continue. Or she could sing “on top” of the chorus while they were singing.

As our session went on, she would now and then make comments. She would tell me: “We have different kinds of songs. We have songs for the Chiefs. When someone is elected a Chief and he comes to the *Adowa* singers and gives them sheep to slaughter and make a feast, we compose songs in his honour which we perform any time we meet with him.” So she taught me the songs of the Chiefs, one by one so I could later relate each of them to the actual period in which each particular chief reigned or at least figure out the order of their succession, which I could verify from the drummer of the *Atumpan* talking drum. This bit of oral tradition was also very interesting for me, for as a young man, it never occurred to me that there would be such historical correlations.

Now and then she would tell me a story about a particular song, such as the song which refers to how someone who led the *Mampon* people in exile for seven years or so and was expecting to be a “big” person, or

given formal recognition as a leader was peeved when he was not given any such position when those who went into exile returned home, and so he created a song about himself lamenting this. He called my grandmother and taught her, who in turn taught members of the group and so this became a part of the repertoire. It is important to note in our present context that this information was passed on by oral rather than written tradition, information one would not find in any written document apart from the *oral* testimony of the culture bearers.

I had a number of meetings with my grandmother and a few other individuals here and there. I wrote down about sixty songs that she taught me. So when I went back to the Training College, I continued to search for other “informants” and found somebody else in the town that could teach me other songs, incidentally someone who happened to have taught Amu some of the same songs when he became conscious of his African identity in music. I compiled all the texts of these songs and a few miscellaneous ones into a manuscript for publication as educational materials that would be studied in Twi speaking schools, for I was then also a Tutor in this language which happens to be my own mother tongue.

### **Consolidating the transition from oral to written tradition**

The manuscript I prepared caught the attention of Dr. Ida Ward, a Professor from the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. She had come to Ghana in 1944 to investigate into Twi orthography problems and submit a report to the Colonial Government, and so she came to the Training College to interview me. She was so pleased with the manuscript and the work I had done on my own initiative that she recommended me immediately for a Commonwealth scholarship to go to her Department in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, to study *linguistics* – not Music or Ethnomusicology which had then not formally raised its head as a possible discipline that would emerge from Comparative Musicology.

When I told Ephraim Amu about this award, he was upset that it was not for music but for linguistics, for as he put it, “Anybody could go and study linguistics but this is not the case with music.” He knew of course that I could not have gone to England to study African music. So he advised me



to study Western music on my own when I got there because the exposure would be intellectually rewarding. Further, I should save some of my scholarship allowance so that I could buy an upright piano at the end of my stay in London and bring it back home with me, for this was what he did when he also was a student in London. He told me precisely where I would find a good piano, such as a Mornington and Weston upright piano, and so on. Although I was puzzled by this, I followed his advice, for it dawned on me that he was being realistic in terms of the bi-musicality and reciprocity that the long period of colonial intervention had created in Ghana and that this would eventually enable me to interact effectively with my western colleagues on my own terms as the need arose.

Accordingly while pursuing my studies in linguistics, I also seized the opportunity of continuing my interest in music at Trinity College of Music. Since it was a thoroughly western institution with no Africa oriented courses, it turned out to be a good bridge in my transition from oral to written tradition. The challenge I found after I enrolled there was not just what I learned and how much of it but selecting what seemed to me applicable, with or without modification, in an African context, the type and degree or extent of such modifications that would be artistically possible and aesthetically valid in my culture.

### **Acquiring systematic approach to language and music**

My studies in the Africa Department of the school of Oriental and African Studies (1944-49) introduced me to African Linguistics, Oral Literature and Social Anthropology but not Music. I was able to take additional courses in music elsewhere so that I could qualify for admission to the University of London Degree courses in English language and literature, History and *Music*, for although my scholarship was for two years, I was offered a three year Assistantship at the School before it elapsed in the second year so that besides my specialisation in African Studies at the basic level, I could pursue additional courses, including courses in General linguistics and a certificate course in the Phonetics of English.

In bringing these personal details, which prepared me for participation in international scholarship but which may seem like a red herring, to your attention, I do so primarily because of the early multidisciplinary approach

to my ancestral heritage of music it enabled me to develop as a so-called Third World scholar interested in understanding and grasping the sensibility behind the creative potential of my ancestral heritage and which I maintained throughout my career.

Although I seemed to be literally overloaded with auxiliary courses in that early period, I found time to develop the bi-musicality that Amu had subtly introduced and encouraged me to develop. I sustained my private interest in composing African music in the new mode but developed my personal style as Amu had previously urged me to do. I concentrated on writing solo songs in my own language with piano accompaniment in my own style that replicated the subtleties of figuration and other nuances in traditional drumming. Since I did not have access to a choir to enable me to develop my own brand of choral music as Amu had done in Ghana, I began to write a few pieces on my own initiative for a few western instruments played by my British friends interested in my style of writing “new” African music.

Reminding myself now and then of the advice of Amu who had urged me to study western music privately during my sojourn in Britain and so develop an appreciable level of bi-musicality in the manner he did at the Royal College of Music, I found time to go to concerts at the Albert Hall and other venues besides taking formal courses at Trinity College of Music. I was keen on expanding my knowledge of western music and developing my compositional skills, for like Amu, I was confident that broadening my creative sensibility in this manner would be advantageous as long as I kept my African roots, for it is not only western scholars and composers who can retain their identity or cultural values and mannerisms while exploring other cultures but also Africans, as Amu had demonstrated.

Ethnomusicology had then not raised its head even though the folk song movement had caught up with Cecil Sharp, Vaughan Williams the famous British Composer and some folklorists in England and elsewhere, while a secretariat of the International Folk Music Council had been established in London (in 1948) with Maud Karpeles as Secretary. Unfortunately I never heard about it until much later after I returned to Ghana. It would not have made much difference to me since I had a firm grip on my own culture.

### **Research fellowship in African music and related arts**

It seemed from all my activities that my training at the School of Oriental and African Studies originally intended to prepare me to implement Professor Ida Ward's Report on the revised Orthography of the Twi language which covered a lot more grounds than was originally envisaged was Providential, and that it would simultaneously prepare me for a position at the newly established University College of the Gold Coast (later renamed Ghana when the country ceased to be a British Colony), which prepared students for degrees of the University of London, and thus enable me to make full use of my acquired multidisciplinary background.

This became a reality on my return home from England, for after three years of service at the Training College, which was long enough for completing the initial phase of the Orthography project, I was offered appointment in 1952, after due process, as a Research Fellow (with the status of a Lecturer) in *African Studies* at the University College on the initiative of Professor Busia, the Ghanaian Head of Department of Sociology. As he himself focussed his courses on Social Philosophy and Contemporary Sociological Theories and had appointed British Lecturers in Social Anthropology and Social Psychology, what he wanted specifically was someone in "African Studies" whose research focus would be on language, *music*, dance, folklore etc. Anticipating the field research needs of such a person, he had provided for a car and a driver, a technical assistant who would operate a Perfectone Swiss tape recorder, a generator and a camera that had been purchased for the project and had made the necessary budget allocation for other expenses so that the project could take off immediately I assumed duty.

Unlike my colleagues in the Sociology Department, research was my full time occupation. I had no students and therefore, could alternate my field trips and the analysis and writing up of my field materials to suit my convenience.

As far as research methodology was concerned, my studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies had emboldened me to approach African music and its oral traditions in the same manner as linguists and

ethnographers who deal with the diversity of socio-cultural events and languages in Africa and elsewhere do – the methodology that enables one

- (a) To deal with the particulars of single but multifaceted events or individual languages, clusters of related languages etc on different levels of abstraction, and
- (b) To relate analytical procedures on the structural and semantic levels to contexts of situation.

Naturally my interest in African music led me to think of it not only as “sounds that are arranged in a way that is pleasant or exciting to listen to” (as the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* defines music) but also to situate it first and foremost in my own culture and its oral traditions, ideas and events or activities that are linked with music making and the fact that items or repertoires of songs etc are stored in the minds of individuals and performing groups and drawn upon in particular contexts of music making to which new ones are added from time to time. While songs in a repertoire may be varied in performance, new ones are not normally created on the spur of the moment in performance even though such items can be introduced during a performance if they are simple or straightforward. Composing in my ancestral tradition, which is oral and not notated in writing, is thus a creative cultural activity that is guided by the extent of one’s knowledge and competence in a particular *African* tradition.

It was such insights from my own culture, coupled with my ability to analyse and systematise my field data, including analytical observations etc that enabled me to join ranks with other scholars in the Society for Ethnomusicology when it emerged in 1955 as the successor of Comparative Musicology. It was in that year that my book on *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*, which received a raving review in the Times Literary Supplement in London, was published. Naturally it was the warm reception the manuscript received in the Department of Sociology from my colleagues and the Head of the Department himself that encouraged its publication, for I looked at performances of dirges not only as musical events but also as socio-cultural events in which allusions to history, kinship, places of domicile etc were made alongside the singers’ own reflections etc. Moreover it incorporated the original texts I had

collected, transcribed and analysed and translated into English for the first time for the benefit of readers.

Similarly in response to a notification I received about an International Conference of the International Folk Music Council scheduled to be held in Liege, Belgium in 1957, I wrote a paper on “Possession Dances in African Societies” I had observed in the field and sent it to the Secretary in the hope that it would be read for me in absentia as I did not have travel funds at my disposal. Fortunately, coming from Africa – from the blue as it were – Klaus Wachsmann, a leading Africanist and a staunch member of the Executive Board of the Council read it on my behalf. It was the second signal I had after my *Funeral Dirges* that I was on the right path and that I would join ranks with colleagues in Folk Music and Ethnomusicology at the appropriate time if I maintained that standard and depth of research interest.

Applying the approach I used in investigating into single socio-cultural events such as *Funeral Dirges* mentioned above to larger and more variegated units, I attempted to bring together my findings in various locations of the musical traditions of Ghana and compile them into a single volume for publication as *African Music in Ghana*. Longmans Green accepted it for publication in London in 1962 under the auspices of the newly established Arts Council of Ghana, while Professor Melville Herskovits immediately recommended it for publication the following year by Northwestern University Press at Evanston in the USA.

Based on that experience and the fieldwork and extensive data gathering I had done from different sources on the musical traditions of Africa, and my experience in teaching Graduate courses at UCLA, I wrote an introductory book on *the Music of Africa* at the request of W. W. Norton Publishers in the USA in 1974, which is still on the market and which has been translated into German, Italian, Chinese and Japanese.

Naturally it was my experience at the of School of Oriental and African Studies that served as a model for taking a large chunk of Africa which displays certain uniformities and diversities as my focus of study, and to adapt the methodology for dealing with individual languages, clusters of languages etc on different levels of abstraction of sounds, structures etc for dealing with the music of Africa.

My scholarly publications expanded rapidly as the years rolled by, while my creative output began to slow down inversely as participation in conferences and meetings etc increased and other contexts of application of research became a political priority in Ghana. Developing an Archive of Field Recordings and other sources ensured that I did not lose touch with the experiential aspect of this scholarly enterprise which I kept going through original compositions and arrangements, and that I could renew my musical memory of my field materials whenever an item had to be re-called. In other words, composition became an adjunct rather than my main thrust even though it was that art that drew me to the scholarly study of my ancestral legacy.

### Creative perspectives

Systematising knowledge of traditional music, which became a major preoccupation as I searched for ways of looking at my ancestral heritage, nearly always went hand in hand with my interest in exploring its **creative potential** because the objective of my fieldwork was not only to record traditional music for listening and preservation but also *to gain knowledge of the fundamentals of that music and its compositional techniques revealed by its analysis* so that I could compose my own music even where I borrow compositional materials from other African societies. In this connection the dictum that “analysis is composition in reverse” is something I always kept in mind.

However as I looked at the close relationship between language and music making, music and movement, music and dance as well as the resultant parallels and differentiations between the usages of language communities or music communities, I was compelled, as happens to most creative African musicians, to concentrate initially on the creative exploration of the resources of selected traditions of my own ethnic group and master the challenges that emerged so that I could create my own music in that style before I looked elsewhere.

Accordingly I could compose an Akan melody or set any text or verse I wrote in that language to music *in the traditional style*. I could also write tunes for Amu’s “improved” version of the bamboo flute or a western instrument for a change. It is this simple approach to composition that I

sustained, for my experience in the Africa Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London which gave me a broad base for looking at African languages and cultures emboldened me to look at music in a similar manner, while the ideology of Pan-Africanism, which emerged in Ghana in the 1950s as a political strategy for forging African unity presented itself to me both as

- (a) A *creative strategy* for exploring paradigmatic alternatives that emerge as one analyses and examines different structures and forms in the various African traditions that one comes across, and
- (b) A *development strategy* for sharing the African experience and, in the process, broadening the scope of music making in various communities.

For example, when I had the opportunity of doing field work in Tanzania in 1966 and recorded the large repertoire of songs of different ethnic groups performed regularly by the National Dance Company, I transcribed them not only for the purpose of analysis of their form and structures but also for use as pedagogical and “concert” material that could be arranged for performance and presentation with Amu’s version of the traditional Akan Bamboo flute. On the same basis I could use those tunes and others like them as thematic materials for extended works that explore *intercultural* approaches to composition, which greatly interested me as another way of carrying Amu’s creative innovation forward.

In other words, the relevance of the scholarly enterprise to composition lay, among others, in the way it enabled me as a composer in Africa

- (a) To go beyond the minimum cognitive knowledge of how tones and rhythm, the shared constituents of music and language, are integrated in music making according to the basic principles of phrasing in the culture, as well as how these may be replicated even in instrumental music with no hidden texts, and
- (b) To transcend ethnicity in musical and cultural encounters and so facilitate appropriation of ideas and materials in a manner that makes similarities and differences sources of enrichment and not

impediments, for my sensibility as a composer and my studies in linguistics enabled me to handle not only the integral relationship between speech and music but also the nuances of articulation that occur in speech and how these may be used creatively, that is in an artistic manner that makes a song aesthetically meaningful.

One normally deals with such fundamental problems largely in one's moment of thinking and reflection on the procedures and process of composition that have not been routinized in practice and not during the intense moment of creation where now and then one takes decisions on certain details of syntax that emerge or makes choices or preferred changes as one proceeds.

Accordingly although I was not formally studying African music in London when I was at the school of Oriental and African Studies, composing music that explores the potential of the Akan materials I had previously collected became my hobby, first because it enabled me to think of the materials of my traditional music in different ways as I recalled them and second, because I could take advantage of the intercultural baggage I carried as a person from colonial Ghana exposed to western culture, music and so forth, and take certain decisions as to what I liked or could use from that culture, which I was experiencing anew in London, without blurring my own identity enshrined in traditional practice.

### **Integrating theory and practice**

As a literate composer, my previous experience in Ghana had already enabled me to systematize some aspects of music making beyond my cognitive knowledge of the speech factor, which I had acquired from childhood. I was aware for example, that the scale in common use in my non-literate society is heptatonic, and that what determines phrase endings are the intervallic progressions in each phrase, which may be so ordered that the final note of a song would generally be determined by the progression of the preceding phrases. Accordingly the terminal note of the song may be the lowest note of the scale (doh) or any note above it (ray, me, fah, soh, lah) depending on the progression that leads to the pre-final phrase and the placement of the phrases antecedent to it, all of which follow the same rule. This phenomenon was prevalent



in my early collection of *Adowa* songs I learned to sing from my grand mother; so I knew that I could create similar progressions and vary the non-final and final cadences in my compositions. In other words, I could view it as a creative strategy governed by modality of some sort that governs the placement of final and pre-final tones of speech texts. These progressions are so fundamental that when group singing is not in unison but in two parallel voices, each voice will automatically follow the tones of the text with occasional stylistic deviations here and there.

Similarly in writing solo songs for example, irrespective of what instrument I chose to accompany them, I would observe the traditional usage in my society that closely correlates the notes and rhythms of a melody with the tones and durational values of the rhythm of the verbal text I set to music. If I set a text like *wo ho te sen* (how are you) whose pitches are low-high-low-high [ \_ - \_ - ], it would be sung as [ m s r f ], taking into account the *down drift* that occurs when a high tone syllable followed by a low tone is followed by another high tone syllable. The pitch of this second high tone syllable drops two semitones or so lower than the first high tone syllable. If I take a sentence like *wokoo ho bi* (you also went there) whose pitches are: high low high low [ - \_ - \_ ], the music will also be [ s m f r ]. I can sing it in any register – high, mid or low – but I will not reverse or alter any of the pitches as one can in the western way [ f l s t ] unless I deliberately want to do so for other reasons. So I soon became interested in the differences between the African way of doing this and at any rate, the western way of doing it. And this was confirmed later by my field experience when I returned to Ghana. Field research in other locations later broadened my awareness and understanding of this problem as I encountered not only other heptatonic usages but also anhemitonic and hemitonic varieties of the pentatonic, which I used in some of my own compositions.

The relationship between song texts and melody is observed in instrumental music. What a flutist plays as tunes may be songs with texts or nonsense syllables, which cannot be articulated. You only hear the tune but you cannot guess what the flute is saying unless, like the flutist himself, you are privy to it. If there is no text and so it is truly abstract, it is still following the usual intonation and rhythmic usage of the language or the “shadow” (intonation and rhythm) of unarticulated texts or motives.

There is thus room for creating an instrumental piece based on a song or a composition that is inspired by motifs derived from it as well as room for *following the same melodic trends in the absence of a text*. In other words, one does not have to collect folk or traditional songs in one's culture and use them as compositional materials if one is a culture bearer. Such a person can create his own songs or tunes in that traditional style and use them as compositional materials.

### **Sensitivity to music and language**

It is noteworthy that this sensitivity to music and language is not confined to Africa even though it takes different forms elsewhere. I was fascinated by this when I was a student in London in the 1940s and had the opportunity of going to a performance of Benjamin Britten's *Beggar's Opera*. I had been taught the different intonation patterns in English for the sentence *Mr. McCrossan is waiting for her*. When spoken as a statement it ends with a falling intonation but when spoken as a question, it is marked by a final rising intonation, which may even start from the beginning of the sentence and end on the concluding high pitch. Benjamin Britten was doing the same sort of thing here and there in his *Beggar's Opera*, utilising the speech styles of his language, which, I am told, is even more evident in popular music where speech syllables and sung syllables can be coterminous at the discretion of a songster. So I was fascinated by the fact that what seemed at first to be peculiar to my tradition had parallels elsewhere which were valid in their own terms.

It became clear, therefore, that as long as I did not deliberately tamper with the rigid tone-tune relationships and syllabic rhythms, the African identity of my Akan music would never get lost or unduly compromised. In other words, the correspondence between a spoken sentence and a musical sentence, a verbal phrase and a musical phrase etc seemed inevitable when there is no creative or artistic reason for altering them. Taking note of such features was important for me when writing music, song texts or poetry (verse without tunes) in my own traditional style.

This interest was something I developed earlier when I was a young student in the Training College at Akropong in the late 1930s. Any time

we had English classes and the instructor was talking about scansion or metres – iambic, trochaic, anapaest and dactyl metre and so forth, I would write down the texts of traditional songs I knew to see if they could be scanned that way. When I could not find the metre that way, it became clear to me that my traditional system was not based on accentual patterns or syllabic durations but on a different principle that I needed to figure out for myself.

Similarly when I was studying Latin in the mid 1940s, because it was then a University of London matriculation requirement, I was so fascinated by the lilt of one of the illustrative texts that I tried to set its *rhythm* to Akan texts but had to modify the Latin metre here and there to get an Akan effect. I had a similar problem when I was studying Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in my English literature course. I was fascinated by the Nun Priest's Tale and so I tried to re-create it in a story in my own language, using the lilt and prosodic features of Akan to make it conform to our style rather than that of the Middle English original. This comparative approach was then my crude way of trying to rationalise the principles that govern performance practice in my society sustained by oral tradition so that I could determine how to vary them in my creative work without impairing its authenticity or blurring recognition.

There are other musical principles such as those that guide the organisation of rhythm in instrumental music, which in Africa, has quite sophisticated linear and multilinear forms that we do not need to elaborate here since it has long attracted analysis.<sup>2</sup> Although my scholarly pursuit made this a wide-ranging quest, my Pan-African creative interest was selective. It lay in selecting what was missing from my own culture, which I could adopt and develop in my creative work.

### **The integrity of music as sounds in motion**

As my experience of traditional African music broadened, it seemed to me that while the cultivation of text-bound music is a common feature of African musical practice that makes thinking of music in linguistic terms a

---

2 For a preliminary exposition of this, see Nketia, J. H. K.: *The Music of Africa*, p. 125-138. New York: W. W. Norton.

very important recourse in the process of music making in my culture, the fact that the creative musician in our orally transmitted musical cultures can also think of music in terms of sequences of nonsense syllables that carry particular tones and specified durations rather than meaningful words showed that thinking of music in terms of itself as *sounds in motion* or the reverse, as *motion in sounds* (where the focus is the movement or dance) is also valid. Indeed a rhythmic phrase meant to be played on a drum or any instrument for that matter could be conceived and articulated as nonsense syllables rather than as lexis or words when it is necessary to articulate it orally.

In other words, exploring the sonic features of music and language are as important for the African composer – literate or non-literate – as the message to be conveyed, if any, implied in their corresponding text, for the listener who does not know or comprehend the text can also be excited by what he hears on that level of communication, while the person who knows the text may be doubly pleased as he responds to both levels.<sup>3</sup>

For music makers in orally transmitted musical cultures such as my own, the ability to use this experience or cognition as a guide and not a set of previously articulated theoretical principles is what distinguishes those who assume distinction as song makers or leadership roles as singers or lead singers, master drummers etc in traditional societies from the rest of the community.

On the same basis, it became evident to me that since there is a close relationship between speech tones and musical tones that defines verbal and musical phrases in songs, the choices previously made by song makers for particular songs cannot be arbitrarily ignored by other singers of the song and that minor changes that take place here and there spell out alternative choices at particular points in the trend of a melody that do not distort meaning in the text that carries it.

## Stylistic traits

In addition to the principles governing the manner in which tones and rhythms of melodies are ordered and grouped in phrases, I observed the

---

3 See Nketia, J. H. K.: "The Aesthetic Dimension in Ethnomusicological Studies". *The World of Music*: 1984: 24 (1), 3-28. Berlin: International Institute for Comparative Music Studies and Documentation.

bundle of stylistic and other differentiations (such as lilt, semantic focus etc) that are maintained between the musical types cultivated in a particular community not only for their “formal compositional details” but also for their functional role because they are supposed to elicit the kind of movement response and other specifics expected of participants in such events and therefore, an essential prerequisite for performers and participants in musical events irrespective of whether they take place at naming ceremonies, funerals and other celebrations or in recreational situations.

In light of the foregoing, confronting the Problem of Style in Compositional contexts in terms of the specifics that define the expressive features that emerge in performance naturally attracted my attention, for the creative use of such traditional sources in contemporary African contexts of composition is intended to ensure that the authenticity of the work is not effaced when the composer combines them with sources from the colonial and missionary legacy. It is this precaution that enables the composer who operates in contemporary contexts to ensure that his externally derived creative ideas do not displace but augment or complement the traditional forms re-contextualised in contemporary contexts.

### **Broadening my experience in the US**

Because of the fact that the greater part of my Education and experience had been shaped by my British colonial background and interaction with scholars and musicians in the western hemisphere, a Director in the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation who came on a visit to Ghana who was very impressed with what he saw of my work nevertheless lamented the fact that I had not visited the United States. I had met quite a number of American scholars in Ethnomusicology at conferences but no composers even though at that point in time American composers were trying very hard to be on their own. They did not want to continue to be tied to the Western European tradition. Assuming that I could benefit from meeting some of the outstanding personalities shaping new trends in American music, he offered me a year long Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to visit the United States in 1958 and meet with American composers and scholars and audit courses. It was because although I had been active in the field since the 1940s, my contacts and serious studies had been mainly in England and some parts of Europe because of my

colonial affiliation. Visiting the US may not only expand my orientation and skills but also enable me to come to grips with African roots of music and catch up with contemporary trends in composition.

My interest in the musical linkages between Africa and the Americas was quickly aroused when a few days after my arrival in New York on September 1958 and secured a temporary lodging on Amsterdam avenue in Manhattan not far from Columbia University, I decided to go on a leisurely stroll to the campus. After walking about a hundred yards or so, I was attracted by the sound of drums to veer my walk to a location in Harlem Park where some African American boys were playing basketball, while others were drumming and dancing. I was pleasantly surprised to see that little bit of Africa there in the vicinity of Columbia University where I had been registered by the Foundation to take a semester course in composition with Henry Cowell, the eminent American composer interested in New Musical Resources, a course on organology with Curt Sachs at my own request and audit another advanced composition course at Julliard School of Music.

Although I moved from my temporary apartment on Amsterdam Avenue soon after the Harlem Park exposure to the International House for the duration of my fellowship, any time I felt I needed a break from my routine activities, I would stroll from there to Harlem Park to remind myself of that experience of Africa in Harlem as I thought about the practical implications of what I witnessed informally for Africa itself where the original form of the kind of drumming I heard in the US exists, not as a survival but as a continuing dynamic element of music making in community life. It encouraged me not only to continue to hold fast to Africa's ancestral legacy of rhythmic usages in my creative work irrespective of whatever else I might adopt from exposure to other resources at Columbia and elsewhere that are compatible with usages in my own culture.

While in New York, I received an invitation to give a public lecture on African Music at Harvard University, which I accepted. I learned later that it was Nicholas England, a Graduate student at Harvard who was also a Teaching Assistant at Columbia University who organised it. It was very well attended and so well received that the Editor of Atlantic Monthly who came to the lecture published the full text the following week in

his journal but with the more sensational title *Drums, Dance and Song* that he knew would appeal to his readers. Mantle Hood and Charles Seeger welcomed me to UCLA with their copy when my Fellowship Programme took me there!

After acclimatising in New York, I proceeded thereafter to Northwestern University where the Foundation had scheduled me as a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and African Studies for the second Quarter session. This was to enable me to interact with Melville Herskovits, author of *The Myth of the Negro Past* who had instituted a programme of research into African roots of music in the Americas and also Alan Merriam, a leading exponent of Ethnomusicology who was following the footsteps of Richard Waterman and Mieczyslaw Kolinski previously hired by Herskovits for his research project. To enable me to interact with other composers, the Foundation also arranged for me to audit an advanced composition course in the School of Music. Accordingly I wrote an instrumental piece entitled *Cow Lane Sextet* for performance in class at the end of the quarter.

My visit to Northwestern was warm and friendly, as I had met Melville Herskovitz previously in Ghana. Eager to connect me with the Black American experience, he arranged for me to stay with a Black Family for the period and also took me to Store Front Churches in Chicago to witness the phenomenon of spirit possession which he was dead sure was an Africanism as he had witnessed similar spirit possession in traditional African communities during his fieldwork in Ashanti, Ghana in 1927! He also took me to Chicago to do a radio show with Stud Terkle as I brought some of my field tapes from Ghana with me to the US.

To conclude my visit to institutions, the Foundation scheduled a two weeks visit to the Institute of Ethnomusicology at UCLA, which had a large collection of instruments so that I could interact with Mantle Hood and Charles Seeger, a visit that paved the way a few years later for the offer of a tenured Professorship in the Music Department at UCLA.

I was given one free month in my travel schedule to spend in New York so that I could go to various performances and appointments that had been arranged for me before returning to Ghana. Although I did not meet as many

Black Americans as I had hoped, I had several chances of doing so on subsequent visits. It seemed absolutely essential from then on for me not only to acquaint myself with African-derived traditions wherever I had the opportunity in the US and indeed other locations of African roots of music but also to interact on different levels with exponents of Diasporic traditions, including scholars and performers in Black communities and professional musicians such as the Jazz Greats who visited the University of Pittsburgh annually during my tenure as Andrew Mellon Professor for the Jazz festival organized by Dr. Nathan Davies, my esteemed colleague in the Music Department.

It is this experience that broadened not only my knowledge and understanding of African roots of music in the Americas in all its variant forms and the vitality of what I experienced but a better appreciation of why it has a firm footing in Africa. Prompted in part by the colonialist and mercantile way of life rather than slavery and transculturation, the foundation for the gradual institutionalisation of popular music (including African roots of music in the Americas,) in the coastal areas of West Africa has blossomed to an independent Africa-centred phenomenon because of the possibility of the creation of local cultural alternatives that its performance practices provide in contemporary African contexts, such that music makers in Africa can refer to their own local variants as African jazz, African Gospel, African Hip hop or Ghanaian Hiplife etc. In other words, the possibility of adapting compositional models that emerge from the creative potential of our common ancestral legacy is open to all culture bearers and indeed the wider world of music.

Accordingly operating in contemporary contexts, I could explore various applications of my knowledge of traditional music in composition along the lines pursued not only by Ephraim Amu who stuck to the melodic and rhythmic features of his traditions but also composers elsewhere such as Bela Bartok, Zoltan Kodaly and Henry Cowell who derived fresh usages from the traditions they encountered.<sup>4</sup> In other words, I could use traditional songs and other sources as materials I could re-create or develop in a composition or I could write music which embodies not only the essential features of traditional music performed in traditional societies but also create *variants and*

---

4 See J. H. K. Nketia: "Developing Contemporary Idioms out of Traditional Music" in *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 1982: 24, 81-97.



*extensions* of tradition in works intended for performance in contemporary institutions and locations such as concert halls, theatres, churches, schools or national occasions by persons recruited and rehearsed for this purpose. In other words, I could define contemporary locally in terms of my local milieu or social environment and what it portends.

I could also *promote* the enduring features of our ancestral heritage by transferring some of its indelible sources to contemporary contexts of application in music education by making the learning of folksongs or traditional songs a compulsory part of the music curriculum instead of what our colonisers taught our children to sing in the colonial period, such as “London is burning,” “Polly put the kettle on” or “Bobby Shafto.” African children could now learn some traditional African songs from other parts of the continent and the larger African world of music in the Americas and elsewhere that could progressively broaden their worldview of music.

### **Reconciling ethnicity and music in national contexts**

Naturally “Exploring Our Ancestral Heritage of Music in Contemporary Contexts” may be triggered not only by the creative urge on which we have focussed but also by political issues raised by ethnicity and the dynamics of social and cultural change, issues not unlike those discussed at the Conference on *Music and Black Ethnicity in the Caribbean and South America* in 1994.<sup>5</sup>

As nurturing and consolidating the sense of nationhood continued to be the most urgent task in colonial Africa on the attainment of independence from colonial rule, the issue of reconciling ethnicity and nationhood in national contexts through music and other aspects of culture became a political priority in Ghana and other African countries. Similarly developing strategies for indigenising colonial institutions and cultural usages where feasible became as critical for continuity as the reinstatement of relevant indigenous traditions in contemporary contexts. Permit me, therefore, to conclude this review with a few observations from Ghana where the political liberation of African countries in Sub-Saharan Africa was set in motion.

---

5 Gerard H. Béhague, ed., 1994: *Music and Black Ethnicity: The Caribbean and South America*. Coral Gables: University of Miami North South Center / New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Dr Nkrumah who spearheaded the agitation for independence and became the first Prime Minister of the Dominion of Ghana and subsequently the President of the Republic of Ghana lost no time in tackling this when he assumed the reins of Government. The promotion of two complementary contexts of culture became an essential feature of his national Cultural Policy, thus preventing the emergence of the somewhat dicey situation in some parts of the New World.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to recall that he prepared the nation himself for this dual position of ethnic cultures in Ghana in his public speeches. Aware that we could not abolish ethnicity, what he denounced was cultural chauvinism engendered by ethnicity, for what seemed pertinent to him at independence above everything else was not recognition of the viability of ethnicity – the rationale of indirect rule in the colonial period – but forging a new sense of nationhood which incorporates or assimilates ethnicity, something which had to be nurtured not only through Policy Statements but preferably also through cultural action and relevant institutions that transcend ethnic boundaries.<sup>7</sup>

In one of his many public speeches he proposed that in the higher reaches of our national life, “ethnic traditions” – particularly specific items of *contemporary relevance* such as artefacts, music and dance forms etc become items of a “national” legacy, not by legislation but by metamorphosis. What belongs on a lower level to a community or an ethnic group, which merits similar redefinition and adoption automatically, becomes national on a higher level of application without nullifying its validity and use in its own context. It is because of such transformational possibilities that he viewed culture and its variable contextual possibilities as a tool for the promotion of the new sense of nationhood.

However as President Nkrumah again put it, the challenge of independence goes beyond a return to the past.

We have to work hard to evolve *new* patterns, *new* social customs, *new* attitudes to life, so that while we seek the material, cultural and

---

6 See Béhague, op. cit.

7 Nkrumah’s Policy statements are embodied in his *Selected Speeches of Kwame Nkrumah* compiled by Samuel Obeng, Centenary Edition 2009 published by Afram Publications (Ghana) Ltd.

economic advancement of our country, while we raise her standards of life, we shall not sacrifice their fundamental happiness.

Viewing music and artistic forms as something to be shared within and across ethnic boundaries irrespective of the locations in which they originate made re-contextualisation a political strategy of cultural promotion that was launched at the dawn of independence through participatory programmes that took place not only in the national capital but also elsewhere, while similar groups in different regions similarly performed in the regional capitals. To facilitate this process, a National Arts Council with a network of regional offices was set up so that this could be a national programme.

To ensure that re-contextualisation of ethnic cultural manifestations becomes not only a regular feature of celebrations but also an integral part of the educational system, cultural studies was made a part of the School system, so that children's awareness of their cultural system sidelined by colonial and missionary intervention would be restored.

Another outcome of the re-contextualisation process was the realisation that culture is learned behaviour and that ethnic music and dance forms that are open and not limited in provenance by ritual and other considerations could be learned by those who do not belong to such ethnic groups by birth, kinship affiliation or residence provided they have the aptitude for them. Inter-ethnic borrowing rampant in the pre-colonial period, which was not curtailed by colonialism similarly confirmed that this process could be institutionalised and that the creation of national or voluntary music and dance groups that perform ethnic music and dance forms is a viable proposition that could be encouraged and/or supported in contemporary contexts.

It is considerations such as these that made the re-contextualisation and promotion of culture a political priority in nation building, leading to the restructuring of state ceremonials with the forms already created for Chieftaincy, a task in which I played an active role in my capacity as a Research Fellow in African Studies who had studied the traditional forms and could adapt them where necessary for particular situations. Let me give you one instance of this.

For the Republic Day celebration at which Dr Nkrumah was sworn in as the first President of the Republic of Ghana, one of the high-ranking Ministers of the new Government who had heard my Twi poetry on the radio but knew that I was in the Sociology Department came to my house to suggest that I assist in structuring the swearing-in ceremony of the President because he wanted a different kind of ceremony that would reflect our traditional culture. “Could you do it?” he asked.

After a brief discussion, he agreed that for symbolic reasons we should not only retain the military band to play the colonial martial tunes to hail our President who is now the Commander-in-chief of the Army, but also arrange for our traditional African drums and horns played for Paramount Chiefs to play at the appropriate moment on this occasion to signify that we have taken over not only the military might of the colonial Governor but also his political power. Our talking drums would herald this with the appropriate messages while the horns played the traditional equivalent of the military fanfare.

This structure was agreeable because in fact, as soon as Nkrumah became President, he went to live in the castle where the British Governor used to reside and run the Government from there. Occupying the castle was not only an act of legitimacy but also a symbolic expression that the British had departed. We did not disband the army. We had taken control of it by occupying the castle of the British Governor, Commander in Chief. Anyway, we worked out a ceremony that allowed us to bring traditional drums and traditional horns to the event without completely eliminating the military fanfare to which the army trained by the British was then accustomed, but we brought in the African equivalent – *fontomfrom*, the Royal court music of Ghana, played solely by court musicians who perform it on important state occasions. President Nkrumah was so pleased with the ceremony that he described it at some length later in his autobiography.

Let us now pause to listen to a bit of this music so that you can appreciate why it made a big impression on him.

Music example 1

First, I would like you to listen to the music of the royal drum ensemble called *Fontomfrom* played at the courts of Paramount Chiefs in Ashanti and other Akan speaking areas on ceremonial occasions which was played on the state occasion mentioned above.

The ensemble consists of one large conical bell which plays the continuous time line for the music, two small drums which play the supporting rhythms of the selected piece, one pair of large bottle-shaped Atumpan talking drums which announce the first line of the piece to be played after the commencement of the time line and supporting drums, and two big drums measuring about five feet which respond to the call of the Atumpan and continue to the end of the piece, and then play waiting beats while the Atumpan introduces the next piece.

Both the Atumpan and the big drums play the rhythms of the text of the piece, while the Atumpan tuned to two contrasting tones a fourth or so apart simulate the speech tones so that the listener in the dancing ring and others standing by can follow the text being communicated. Below is an English translation of the Twi text that begins the entire performance.

The path has crossed the river,  
The river has crossed the path,  
Which is the Elder?  
[ from long ago ]  
We made the path and found the river,  
The river is from long ago,  
From the creator of the universe.

The other drums join in after the third line with the text "*firi tete*", "It is from long ago." He starts again, waits for the response after the third line and continues to the end of the piece. Other texts in similar verse form are substituted for this verse by the Atumpan player with each repetition of the music. Accordingly it is when the drummer of the talking drums begins another text that the big drums join him in a similar manner to the end of each new verse. This music with complicated rhythms has a repertoire of about 80 such proverbs from which a selection made

by the Atumpan drummer in the above manner is played on any given occasion.

### Music example 2

Next, I would like you to listen to the music of the *Ntabera* horn ensemble. The horns, usually a minimum of five in number, are made out of the tusks of elephants and tuned to a pentachord CDEFG. The lead horn blower plays the two upper tones FG [f s] while the four response horns play one tone each but pair up and play CE & DF [d m r f] in a hoquet style that enables each pair to blow their instruments at the appropriate final of the lead player's phrases. As the second of the two pairs is the cadential pair, when the lead player plays his concluding phrase the response instruments end their alternating response except that those who play the cadential tones continue to play their part three times to mark the end of the piece. The important point to bear in mind is that although these instruments play musical tones, those of the lead performer, are always text-bound.

These examples are only to meant to give you some idea of what we already had in our orally transmitted culture which could come to the foreground of a new nation that is referencing its own tradition and building it up. For the military fanfare [sings], we could have borrowed a similar kind of thing from our traditional court to replace it, for our Paramount chiefs also have short horns that play their signature tunes, but we decided to take over the colonial military culture lock, stock and barrel to serve our President as their new Ghanaian Commander-in-Chief.

Thus the question to which we were trying to find an answer was: What do you do with your colonial heritage and your traditional heritage? Obviously you don't throw your colonial heritage away hastily. We have colonial institutions, and many other things accruing from a hundred or so years of colonialism that have become part and parcel of our life. So the critical question was "How do you combine that heritage with your traditional one?" In many areas we have equivalents. In music, yes, we can continue to sing traditional songs and create new songs in that style, but we have obvious instruments of adoption from the colonial heritage like the piano, guitar, brass instruments etc which are sometimes more accessible than the traditional ones which have limited distribution,

divergent tunings and so forth. So do we throw the adopted instruments away when we have not yet tackled the problems raised by their traditional equivalents in particular communities?

When Curt Sachs (1957)<sup>8</sup> was talking about musical instruments of the Western world, he almost said they had no original instruments of their own. Most of the instruments of Medieval Europe were brought from somewhere else. So this way of using something from elsewhere, which you adopt, is not something we should be ashamed of. We could use whatever we want from the colonial heritage and adapt them while we salvage and improve on what we can from our own past or create new ones. So the situation we have now is an open one. I can write music for my traditional musical instruments. I can write for traditional choirs, but I can also write something for adopted western instruments and choirs in my “contemporary” style.

President Nkrumah in fact was quite open on this issue. For the Republic Day Concert on July 1, he wanted us to have a concert of that kind of “contemporary” Ghanaian music in addition to the traditional forms that we have. I had written that kind of music – a Suite for flute and piano that I called *Republic suite*. So on Republic Day he wanted this to be performed at the official concert and invited an American pianist Philippa Schuler who was also a composer to come and perform her own Afro-American piano music at that concert.

My piece was in seven movements. We do not have time to play them here. What I want to point out is that even though I wrote this in Ghana for my Ghanaian friends in 1959, when my friends overseas in the US found it, they were also interested in it. That piece was accepted by an institution in the US for performance for the doctorate degree (D. M. A.) in flute playing. So I’m saying that building one’s culture does not mean that when you have other things from outside which you yourself do not have and you like them, you should not make good use of them. You should be able to incorporate them in a manner that makes them fit into your culture and not let them stick out like a sore thumb. So we may also look at this as part of the problem we are examining as we explore our ancestral legacy in light of intercultural trends, because when you take

---

8 Sachs, Curt: “The Lore Of Non Western Music”, in Arthur Mendel, Curt Sachs and Carroll C. Pratt: *Some Aspects of Musicology*. New York, Liberal Arts Press, 1957.

the piano or whatever and you play it in your own African style, you are *africanizing* it or adding something to it, and that is very important. So right now in Africa we have all the traditional cultures. Now we have the emerging contemporary forms, which are sort of mixing things up, but in all these things what is important is that one's identity comes out in some way. You are able to relate to a point of reference in the music that you hang on to. The other things come as embellishments or extensions, but you have a place you stand in the music that you yourself have composed.

Well, I hope that this gives you some idea of what is happening in Africa that you can compare with the situation here in the Americas where we have ethnic communities that are also developing their own identities through various processes of change generated by economic forces or social and political interaction. The extent to which those who do not belong originally to an ancestral tradition in the Americas also become a part of its cultivation through exposure to it or its deliberate adoption as a national genre because of an open door policy is also worth considering.

In other words, we can also look at the international repercussions of our topic when we look at the story of jazz in Africa or Japan and elsewhere. We can think about the point where cultures meet, the point where we share our cultures. Creating opportunities for sharing knowledge and experience of the different cultures that have come into being as a result of globalization seems to me the important thing we should be looking at these days. Thank you very much.

[Prof. Dr. Seeger requests Prof. Dr. Nketia to play at least a little bit of the Republic Suite.]

## APPENDIX

### NOTES ON REPUBLIC SUITE

Thank you for asking me to play a bit of my *Republic suite* for Flute and Piano. It was the events at the threshold of Ghana's Republican Status in 1959 that precipitated it. It has seven movements.



The first movement was inspired by the resolution of the political conflict that was holding up approval of Ghana's resolution to change from the status of a Dominion of the British Commonwealth to a Republican status. The Opposition led by Professor Kofi Abrefa Busia, Head of the Department Sociology of the University of Ghana could not agree to the schedule of the Government headed by Nkrumah. There was so much bitterness between the two Parties that Busia resigned not only as leader of the Opposition but also as Head of the Department of Sociology and quietly left the country. As I was at Northwestern University in the US as Visiting Scholar when he took this decision, he sent me an air letter in his own hand writing to inform me about this but assured me that he was not leaving academia for good, an assurance which was confirmed later when I received an offprint of his inaugural address from somewhere in Europe!

Although I was shocked by this turn of events, I admired him for resolving the political impasse that was holding up the final declaration of Ghana as a sovereign state and so I made the resolution of the conflict between Nkrumah and Busia the opening theme of my Republic Suite as my creative imagination began to conjure up various scenarios to dramatize Nkrumah-Busia confrontation in a composition for flute and piano in which the sentiments of the two protagonist would be conveyed in sounds and not in words, using a brisk tempo that would make it dialogic and not contemplative.

I chose Professor Busia's by-names *Kofi Abrefa Mmore* as motivic sources of sound and rhythm. Anywhere they occur in the piece – in the flute or piano part – it could be Busia himself murmuring or Nkrumah addressing him. The flute part opens with a dotted quaver and a semiquaver representing Nkrumah hailing the first name of Busia: "Kofi", meaning a boy born on Friday, while the piano responds with *Kofi Abrefa Mmore*, the by-names of Busia, representing Busia asserting himself in response to Nkrumah. But this was my own "trade secret!" So I did not divulge this to Nkrumah when he heard the suite and wanted it to be performed on Republic Day!

The dialogue of reconciliation continues to the end of the first movement, paving the way for celebratory moments and reflection in the succeeding items of the suite, and a concluding Pan African dance piece,

for the philosophy of Nkrumah was that the Independence of Ghana was “meaningless without the total liberation of Africa.”

### Musical example 3

While Suite No. 1 resolved everything amicably for the inauguration ceremony to proceed, it is followed in Suite No. 2 by a theme attributed to the Kruu people of Liberia resident in Ghana, which was popular in Accra because of its syncopated rhythms but which I developed in my own style. I would like you to listen to it.

### Musical example 4

The next Suite (No. 3) is an imaginative portrayal of the colonial situation in Francophone Africa and the emerging challenge of Negritude, while Suite No. 4 is a representation of nostalgic Ashanti and the new political order. We skip these and go on to the next Suite (No. 5) which recalls the Unification of the Ewe of Ghana and neighbouring French Togo who had a problem deciding how to unite and become a single Ewe community in Anglophone Ghana.

As they speak a common language, play the same sort of bell patterns and drums, along with similar complex drums rhythms and sing in the hemitonic and anhemitonic pentatonic scales, there was really nothing to justify the partition into two separate territories by the Imperial Powers of that era. Suite No. 5 therefore, begins with a brief call for unification played in unison by the flute and the piano, which they alternate with brief motifs that elicit responses in their individual parts. It is followed immediately by an interlocking piano part imitative of drumming, which accompanies melodies played simultaneously by the flute.

As soon as this interplay ends, the piano articulates the bell pattern continuously to bring in the second part of the piece which is a dance of joy in which both instruments playing interlocking rhythms end up with a sharp embrace on two closing tones to mark the unification the two Togolands as citizens of Ghana.

### Musical example 5

The last but one Suite (No. 6) was inserted as a nostalgic piece referencing childhood memories of bamboo flute music to provide a break between Nos. 5 and 7 of the Republic suite. So we shall skip it and go on to the last movement of the suite (No. 7), in which I attempt to exemplify Nkrumah's Pan-African concept in a *creative* context of application by bringing together musical excerpts from a few different locations in Africa and the Caribbean to symbolize both the unity and complementarities that emerge when different Pan African sources are combined meaningfully in a work or held together by unchanging pulsation, choice of melodic and rhythmic motifs etc. I begin with a Bashi *Mulizi* flute tune from the Congo played by the piano. The melody is assigned to the right hand while the left hand accompanies it with broken chords on the piano. The melody is then replayed by the flute accompanied by broken chords on the piano played by both hands as in a percussive style.

The flute continues with a development of the tune accompanied by the piano with syncopated rhythms. This leads on to a repeat of the main *Mulizi* tune. A brief linking passage follows. A traditional tune from Ghana then follows the Congolese tune. When the *Mulizi* tune returns, the piano part simulates syncopated rhythms from the Caribbean and North America as a couple of Ghanaian folk tunes are played by the piano. This Pan-African section portrayed largely by syncopated rhythmic motifs brings the work to a close.

#### Music example 6

I hope that the pursuit of the creative dimension of our ancestral legacy in the Pan-African sphere will be of interest to you here in Uruguay. If composers elsewhere can borrow freely from other cultures, there is no reason why cultures that have been or are currently in contact cannot interact in creative terms. It is in the hope that the creative potential of African materials would be of interest that a section of my book on *The Music of Africa* mentioned earlier devotes a whole section to Structures in African Music collated from different sources.

Naturally the distribution of these sources, which exemplify the creative principles of traditional African music, varies. While some basic sources are widespread, others may be more common among contiguous

communities than others. That is why I took the precaution of labelling my first published book on traditional African music as *African Music in Ghana*. However a colleague of mine who read it called me from Uganda somewhat perturbed and asked me “Why did you entitle your book *African music in Ghana*?” I replied that it is because all the examples are from Ghana. He disagreed with me because he was sure that he could substitute examples from Uganda for all my Ghanaian examples. What he failed to note was that items, which exemplify a principle, may differ in substance or some particulars without negating the principle. In other words they could be paradigmatic alternatives – something that a composer might exploit.

## DISCUSSION

### Question and Answer Session

Question: It’s a simple question but it might be a complicated answer. What is the place of a composer in oral tradition in Africa?

Nketia: We have composers in our society insofar as songs performed on social occasions originate from individuals who generally remain anonymous once such items become entrenched in the repertoire. If such a person however, is a composer/performer, because of his visibility he would be recognised as a special individual because of what he does – as *dwontofo* (a singer), *okyerema* (master drummer), player of a particular instrument, etc. Normally he does not earn his livelihood in this way even though he may now and then receive some reward from individual members of an appreciative audience.

As I mentioned in the course of my talk, when I went to my grandmother and asked her to teach me some of the songs in the *adoma* repertoire, she told me about somebody who composed a song and taught her that song, so she could teach the group of which he himself was not a member because it was a female chorus, and so it became part of the repertoire of the group. This is because in traditional society, composing and performing music are cultural activities and not something reserved for specialists who choose to be freelance because they have no customary

obligations to specific traditional institutions that debar them from doing so. We do have composers in oral tradition but they remain for the most part anonymous except in post-colonial contemporary contexts where performing as a wandering traditional musician for gifts or as a pop musician of some sort is institutionalised.

Question: Señor, me siento honrada de poderle hacer una pregunta. Quisiera saber su evaluación – como etnomusicólogo y como africano – sobre la música que nosotros presentamos aquí como candombe. ¿Cuál es su evaluación sobre esta música y qué raíces podemos llegar a encontrar dentro del continente africano?

Nketia: I think candombe is a good institution, which is providing the base for other people to learn the tradition. When someone learns to become a master-drummer or singer through candombe, he has something that he can use if he wants to form his own non-ritualistic performing group. I mean, acquiring just the knowledge, the proficiency of the technique is a wonderful thing and we should look at some of our traditions from that perspective, because they are sources of knowledge, sources of techniques and various ways of relating to one another in an ensemble. All those are useful things to learn and if you have a grasp for that you could also create something that is not limited by ritual and other requirements, but based on the experience of how you distribute parts in an ensemble. It is not something to shun merely because of its religious undertones. I also studied the ritual music of Ghana, because sometimes the best exponents of such traditions are the active participants in the tradition. So Ethnomusicology is open to everything we study, for we are interested in knowledge and the application of that knowledge.

Question: I have two questions: one is the first example you showed us, which had rhythm, which was percussion. It was really different from what we've been hearing these four days, had this complexity and I'd like you to describe to us why this music is so different, so rhythmically complex? This Ghanaian music, what differentiates it from the rest of Africa?

Nketia: You will find the same sort of rhythmic complexity in some of the music played in other parts of Africa because we share particular ways of grading and combining rhythms linearly and multilinearly. That particular

drum ensemble you just heard naturally has several different pieces it plays, each based on the particular verbal texts from which the rhythms and tones are derived. What you just heard is music of the royal court and the performers were those of the royal court of the Paramount Chief of the Ashanti region of Ghana. It takes some time to learn the tradition and learn the entire repertoire. As I said the proverbs arranged in the form of verse number over 80. Each one is rounded off with a closing refrain, and so the drummers play only a few of them at a time for the solo dancers as they take their turns in the dancing ring.

Single drums or drum ensembles are also played to accompany songs or other instruments. And so a contemporary composer can write songs for drums and a chorus or for a drum or a drum ensemble and other instruments.

I have a small piece, entitled *Dance of the Maidens* [April 1960], in which I use a traditional song sung by maidens as the theme of the work, but which is arranged for flute, oboe, and piano and the *Atumpam* drum which is a set of two drums tuned to two contrasting pitches high (female) and low (male) drumheads, stick clappers and a clapperless bell.

Music example 7  
Dance of the Maidens



Dr. Ephraim Amu



R. O. Danso

## Bibliography

Agyemang, Fred, 1988: *Anu the African: A Study in Vision and Courage*. Accra: Asempa Publishers, Christian Council of Ghana.

Béhague, Gerard H., ed., 1994: *Music and Black Ethnicity: The Caribbean and South America*. Coral Gables: University of Miami North South Center / New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Cowell, Henry, 1930: *New Musical Resources*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1964: "The Composer's World", in William Kay Archer, ed.: *The Preservation of Traditional Forms of the Learned and Popular Music of the Orient and the Occident*. Urbana: Institute of Communications Research, University of Illinois.

Heartz, Daniel and Bonnie Wade, eds., 1981: *International Musicological Society: Report of the Twelfth Congress, Berkeley 1977*. Kassel: Bärenreiter.

Herskovits, Melville J., 1941: *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Holloway, Joseph E., ed., 1990: *Africanisms in American Culture*: Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Maultsby, Portia K., 1990: "Africanisms in African American Music", in Holloway, Joseph E., ed.: *Africanisms in American Culture*: Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nketia, J. H. Kwabena, 1955: *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*. Legon: University of Ghana. / Achimota, and Exeter: James Townsend and Sons. Reprint 1974, Westport: Greenwood Press.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1957: "Possession Dances in African Societies". *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* 8 (4-8).

\_\_\_\_\_, 1958: "Drums, Dance and Song". *Atlantic Monthly* 203 (4): 69-72.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1962: *African Music in Ghana*. London: Longmans Green and Co. / Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1963: *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1974: *The Music of Africa*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1982: “Developing Contemporary Idioms out of Traditional Music”, in *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 1982: 24, 81-97.

\_\_\_\_\_, 1984: “The Aesthetic Dimension in Ethnomusicological Studies”. *The World of Music* 1984: 24 (1) 3-28. Berlin: International Institute for Comparative Music Studies and Documentation.

\_\_\_\_\_, 2009: *African Art Music in Ghana*. Accra: Afram Publications (Ghana) Ltd.

Obeng, Samuel, 2009: *Selected Speeches of Kwame Nkrumah*. Centenary Edition. Accra: Afram Publications (Ghana) Ltd.

Sachs, Curt, 1957: “The Lore Of Non Western Music”, in Arthur Mendel, Curt Sachs and Carroll C. Pratt: *Some Aspects of Musicology*. New York, Liberal Arts Press.



MUSICAL EXAMPLES ON THE ATTACHED CD  
EJEMPLOS MUSICALES EN EL CD ADJUNTO

1. Fontomfrom	p. 49
2. Ntahera	p. 51
3. Republic Suite 1	p. 55
4. Republic Suite 2	p. 55
5. Republic Suite 5	p. 55
6. Republic Suite 7	p. 56
7. Dance of the Maidens	p. 59