“You can’t run away from it! The melody will always appear!” Yaa Amponsah and the Rhythm at the Heart of West African Guitar

A thesis submitted by

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Abstract

The song “Yaa Amponsah” is held by Ghanaian musicians as the key to all highlife music. However, *Amponsah* occupies two spaces: that of a specific song with folkloric and historical origin stories, and that of a compositional form—or “Rhythm”—from which countless variations have evolved over the past century. This thesis seeks to define Amponsah as a style where certain characteristics are not always clear but are continually present and recognizable cross-nationally. Using musical analysis and ethnographic interviews with West African guitarists, I explore the movement of *Amponsah* across generations and national boundaries, drawing larger conclusions that have implications for understanding the transmission of cultural practice and embedded cultural memory carried within a specific musical expression. The Rhythm makes impactful appearances in the music of neighboring countries, becoming entwined with the Mami Wata myth, further complicating our understanding of ownership and origin, and bringing this song to the center of a debate regarding ownership of folkloric intellectual property and the relationship between developing nations and global capital.

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I would never have set out on the path of African guitar music if it had not been for those early Afropop radio shows produced by Sean Barlow, Banning Eyre, and Georges Collinet. As a fifteen-year-old I began recording cassettes of those shows and we'd listen to them in between Sonic Youth and Gang of Four records. In my sophomore year at Carleton College, I befriended the first ethnomusicologist I'd ever met (or heard of!), Jay Pillay, who confirmed that I was on the right path and gave me a couple fantastic records to dub.

I am grateful to the Department of Music at Tufts University which has supported my graduate work. I am indebted to Professors David Locke, Richard Jankowsky, Stefan Pennington, and Jeffrey Summit, as well as to outside thesis reader Eric Charry of Wesleyan University. Additionally, I am grateful to my

friend Emmanuel Attah Poku, lecturer and leader of the Kiniwe African Drum and Dance Ensemble whom I assisted in 2018 and 2019. Thanks to my fellow guitarist, Colter Harper, who let me crash on the floor of Fulbright House on the cool, green campus of the University of Ghana in both 2018 and 2019.

I have worked with many incredible musicians, beginning in Chicago. My collaborators in the Occidental Brothers are a true family, and we have logged many notes and miles together—so a warm thanks to the master musicians Greg Ward, Makaya McCraven, Joshua Ramos, Marcus Evans, Antonio Carella, and Junius Paul. I've collaborated with many African musicians both in the OBDBI and in other projects, and wish to thank Daniel "Rambo" Asamoah, Kofi "The Black Trumpet" Cromwell, Samba Mapangala, Jonal, Mathew Tembo, Balla Kouyate, and Moussa Diakate for their friendship and sharing their cultures with me. Thank you to my brother Anthony Akablay.

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This paper belongs to all of us.

Contents

Chapter I: Musical Analysis of Amponsah: the Iconic, the Interpretive

Sunday 18 March 2019, 11:30a
Shaba Spot, Tabora #6, Lapaz, Accra, Ghana

[toc toc toc]

[toc toc toc]

NB: Do you hear that? That clicking? The three...

Akablay: Yeah. The guy going over there.

NB: What is he... Is he selling something?

Akablay: He's a cobbler.

NB: They usually have, maybe scissors in their hand. It sounds to me like a frikyiwa.

Akablay: Yeah, a frikyiwa[1], yeah. "Ka Ka Ka" [snapping, three times]. And it's rhythmic… it's the highlife rhythm. He's walking with that sense of highlife groove in the head. I mean the reason is, he does not want to get tired. Doing his job. So, he keep that, and then he'll be singing some song as he's walking around. So he'll play [snapping the 1-2-3], he'll be singing a song in his head, and then will be hitting the metal against whatever he's holding to draw people's attention that he's around—he's passing. And then also to keep him going.

NB: So is that "in-between" [I count four and clap three off-beats]

Akablay: Exactly.

NB: So maybe he's stepping *here* [putting the three claps between my steps]

Akablay: Yeah, he's stepping, and then [three claps in between]

NB: That's amazing. That rhythm is everywhere, isn't it?

Akablay: Is everywhere. Is everywhere.

NB: What do you call that rhythm? Do you have a name for it?

[1] The *frikyiwa* is an iron bell shaped like a clamshell and played one-handed. The player hangs the bell over the middle finger and strikes it with an iron ring that is around the thumb.

Akablay: There is no name. They would need a name for the instrument, but the rhythm no. Just look at him—as he's passing, just observe him.

[toc toc toc] (Akablay 2019b)

Echoes

It was a very hot morning in the heights above the Lapaz road on Accra's west side. I'd been up early to meet with the musical director of the Emmanuel Methodist Church before the services began and now I met with guitarist Anthony Akablay at Shaba Spot on a dusty side street about 1.5 km west of the church, and a short distance from the guitarist's current house. A "spot" is a casual, open-air drinks bar, and I had met Aka at this one before in recent the years. A couple of nights earlier I had received a brutal first lesson in Ghana-style 10x10 checkers which is the locals' sport of choice.

The interlude with which I open illustrates an epiphany I had on this trip. In the city there are countless vendors about on the street, many of whom are selling drinks or food. But since my earliest visit I had noticed certain men who walked the streets carrying a handmade wooden box and beating these three strokes as they walk—they either sharply snap together the finger rings of their scissors (a move almost identical to the playing of the Ghanaian *frikyiwa* bell), or by striking the scissors' handles against the side of their box. These men are cobblers who perform repairs on people shoes and sandals. I knew that their knocking was designed to call the attention of any within earshot, to announce

that they were passing and available to work[2]. My fresh realization was that I had always misheard their signature rhythm—I had thought of it as being "on the beat."

With no point of reference, the three strokes present as follows:

Figure 1.1: The outsider's perception of the cobbler's rhythm.

To hear the cobbler's rhythm like this is to hear it incorrectly and completely outside of its context. While I felt foolish for mishearing it for so many years, I was pleased to know that my stride was now in step with the flow of the music. The missing contexts that led to my mishearing were: (1) the cobbler's footfall which shows where his "strong" beats were and placing the clicks in syncopation between the his steps, (2) the song which the cobbler is singing in his head which we cannot know, and (3) the aesthetics of Ghana music.

Knowing about Ghana[3] music—traditionally called highlife—we know that arguably the most important and common internal rhythm of many of its styles and song forms is what the octogenarian guitarist Koo Nimo smilingly calls

[2] This same three stroke rhythm is embedded in the iconic recording, "Postal workers canceling stamps at the University of Accra" in 1975, included in *Worlds of Music* and elsewhere.
[3] Most Ghanaians I know will commonly use the noun "Ghana" as a modifier in English, as well as the adjective "Ghanaian": i.e. Ghana music, Ghana drumming, Ghana guitar. I have encountered this in how Balla Kouyate uses "Mali", too. I do not know if this is some artifact of African linguistics, but it is part of how we speak together, and I use it throughout this paper.

the "up-up-up"[4], which sounds on the up-beats following pulses 2, 3, and 4 in a measure of 4/4 music. This knowledge of where to anchor your ear in this or any music requires some amount of education and indoctrination, or some degree of insidership. This rhythm is not expected by or intuitive to one trained in Western music, but it is elementary—or elemental—to the Ghanaian. The up-up-up is an essential building block of their distinctive rhythm, and as we see in the cobbler's tale, it is everywhere if you have the eyes to see or ears to hear it. I had come to realize that it is this pattern that the cobblers tap out as they walk the dusty streets of Accra, and it should be written as it is heard by Ghanaians:

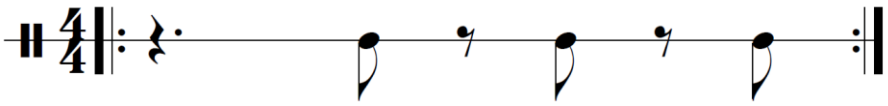

Figure 1.2: The cobbler's rhythm, the Up-Up-Up.

In *Ethnomusicology in Ghana*, Professor Nketia directs us to examine these "musical expressions on three distinct but mutually related levels: the levels of sound, structure, and context" (Nketia 1970, 16), and it now seemed that I was approaching the cobbler's rhythm with these three ears. It was with this same awareness that I sought to understand Ghana most iconic guitar music,

[4] Koo Nimo (Daniel Amponsah) says that he borrows this "up-up-up" term from the American ethnomusicologist Andrew Kaye. Kaye wrote his dissertation and an unpublished book about Koo Nimo and uses this term for the rhythm because the Ghanaians have no name of their own for it. Kaye uses the term in an article from a periodical published by the New York radio station, WKCR (A.L. Kaye 1988). Koo thinks of this piece as concert program notes, however—presumably for his New York City debut at Alice Tully Hall on July 29, 1988, mentioned at the end of the article. Koo showed me the article in August of 2019, and Koo thinks of this as an origin point, but the article presents the term as one already in use.

and specifically "Yaa Amponsah"—a song so ever-present in the culture as to be almost a style as much as a song.

Inside/Out

This thesis seeks first to look at the evolution of both this music and its cultural context with special attention to its transmission, second to define *Amponsah* as a "Rhythm" where certain musical characteristics are not always clear but nevertheless continually are present and recognizable, and third to examine how this song has embedded itself into a wide variety of musics in Ghana, West and Central Africa, and the Americas. Using interviews with musicians from Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinée, and Mali, I explore the transmission of Amponsah across generations, drawing larger conclusions that have implications for understanding the transmission of cultural practice (Denning 2015; Waterman 1990) and embedded cultural memory carried by the various versions of *Amponsah*. I begin by recounting my own relationship with Amponsah as a performer and student of this music.

I played music for many years with a Chicago-based highlife band. Several of the band members were Ghanaian. When we recorded our song "Mafiwo,"[5] the guys put a percussion intro on the front end of the tune that was great, but which confounded me when I tried to enter with my guitar. I have realized that I was making the same mistake as with the cobbler's rhythm, and

[5] Occidental Brothers Dance Band Int'l, "Mafiwo," from the cd *Ɔdɔ Sanbra*, 2008. Written by Nathaniel Braddock and Kofi Cromwell.

that I was placing the core three-stroke theme upon the strong beat. I have further realized that even while making this correction, the pulse that the drummers hear as "beat one" is what I hear as beat three.

That is all from one simple rhythm—three quick strokes on a bell. But what of the repertoire of guitar music? In 2007 I found myself playing at a cultural event with a small group of Ghanaian musicians from the worship band of Jesus House, a Redeemed Christian Church of God congregation that served much of Chicago's Christian West Africans. The drummer was my bandmate, Asamoah (whom everyone called Rambo), and the bassist was Ebenezer (whom everyone called Ayatollah). The audience members were all Ghanaians. After we played, I was approached by an older gentleman who told me that I "played Amponsah very well." I was flattered because this man was "Uncle Joe"—a singer from one of Ghana's celebrated post-independence highlife bands, the Ramblers International. However, while I had heard my friends mention this song "Amponsah," I was vexed by Uncle Joe's compliment because I did not know the song and I certainly did not know how to play it.

I got my hands on a recording of "Yaa Amponsah" performed by the guitarist Koo Nimo[6] and set about transcribing it. I got about three hours and two measures into the project before throwing up my hands in frustration—I couldn't crack the code and could not even identify the downbeat. I followed up

[6] Koo Nimo, "Yaa Amponsah" from *Vintage Palmwine*, 2003.

with Rambo and learned that our song "Ɔdɔ Sanbra"[7] would be considered an *Amponsah*, and that while an actual song, it was more properly thought of as a song-form, with an established chord progression, melodic, and rhythmic conventions, but countless variations.

The following year I made my first trip to Ghana where I studied this song in its earliest stylistic iterations—styles that date to the earliest African music recordings of the 1920s (Collins 1996; 2006; 2019). When I first tumbled out of the terminal at Accra's Kotoka airport in 2008, I was greeted by Rambo's friend and former bandmate Anthony Akablay. The January night was crushingly hot and full of unfamiliar smells, but Aka's easy smile and confidence put me at ease as we wove through the throngs to his beat-up Mercedes and away into the African city. Asamoah Rambo and Aka had played as youngsters with Jewel Ackah's Butterfly Six band before they were drafted into a new group based in Takoradi, the Western Diamonds. The Western Diamonds rose to prominence in the early 1990s, repeatedly being voted Ghana's band-of-the-year and traveling abroad with Ghanaian President Jerry Rawlings[8]. On one such trip, a number of bandmembers opted to drop out of the band and stay in the United States, but Akablay returned and his been one of the most in-demand guitarists in Accra

[7] The Occidental Brothers Dance Band Int'l, "Ɔdɔ Sanbra," from the cd *Ɔdɔ Sanbra*, 2008. Written by Nathaniel Braddock and Kofi Cromwell.

[8] Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings seized control of the Ghanaian government in a 1979 coup d'état, at which time he executed supreme court justices, general, and ex-heads-of-state who were viewed as corrupt. Within the year, Rawlings handed the government back to a democratically elected president before taking power again in a second coup in 1981. He reestablished democratic elections in 1992 and served as elected president until 2001.

since. He leads his own group, and has played on countless recording sessions for gospel, highlife, hiplife, and fusion artists. In 2012 I was able to deepen my understanding of "Yaa Amponsah" and its importance in Ghana music when I performed and taught with the reigning patriarch of Ghanaian guitar, Koo Nimo. In 2013 I made my first trip to stay and study with him at his compound in Kumasi in 2013[9].

As I continued my music work over the next decade I would continue to collaborate with African musicians from across the continent—and I would find "Yaa Amponsah" appear in surprising places. While living in Sydney, Australia, I led a band with Moussa Diakite[10], a Malian guitar player who had performed with both Bamako's Super Rail Band and international superstar Salif Keita. When once I was causally playing *Amponsah*, he jumped in eagerly and with great affection—calling it by the name "Mami Wata." After moving to Cambridge, Massachusetts, I performed with the Malian griot musician Balla Kouyate who had a similar reaction when I played *Amponsah*—he was delighted to hear it and keen to jump in with a set of melodies on his balafon. Through these and other musical encounters I found myself becoming enmeshed in a network of evolving traditions, attributions, and origin myths that were fascinating but difficult to resolve.

[9] I have also contributed a section to Koo Nimo's published memoir (Edmonds 2016, 292–93).
[10] Moussa also performed under the name "Doncomodja"—the "hand of god."

The song “Yaa Amponsah” is thought by Ghanaian musicians to be the center of their music. As Kumasi-based guitarist George Spratz put it, “’Yaa Amponsah’—it became the lingua franca of the highlife music… So if you are a highlife player and you can't play ‘Yaa Amponsah’, then you probably come from Senegal or Nigeria—but not a Ghanaian! Do you get me?” (Spratz 2019). Even so, the music director of Accra’s Emmanuel Methodist Church, Ekow Paintsil, told me: “Yaa Amponsah is the bed of highlife music traditionally in Ghana. But as event unfolds, as time goes by, we try to infiltrate it with other rhythms that makes it more modern. Appealing to the current generation”(Paintsil 2019). For Ghanaians, “Yaa Amponsah” occupies two spaces: that of a specific song with folkloric and historical origin stories, and that of a compositional form or “Rhythm” from which countless variations have evolved and continue to evolve. Its roots are in palmwine music—the earliest of the African guitar musics—and it projects forward into many aspects of contemporary Ghanaian musical practice as well as into the repertoires of other African nations (Agawu 2016). The original composition is credited to Kwame Asare of the Kumasi Trio who recorded the first performance for the British Zonophone label in 1928. However, there are antecedents echoing in the culture before the recording and the Kumasi Trio recording is understood to sit at a transitional point in the cultural continuum (Collins 1996).

On the one hand, “Yaa Amponsah” is the ultimate culmination and expression of the palmwine guitar music, a tradition that harkens to pre-colonial

musicking, and on the other it defines the cosmopolitan sound of West African highlife as Ghana became the first post-colonial republic. This song ascends and is documented at a moment of modernization and technological change, and thus straddles two eras of music making, of cultural practice, and of the global economy. Changes in transportation, in commerce, and in communication were heralding an era of social, economic, and political change. Notably it is the dawn of the commercial recording industry and of African radio (Denning 2015). The woman for whom the song is named embodied transition and transformation as she is a Ghanaian who hosted European-style parties and taught ballroom dancing to a new African elite—the cocoa brokers (Collins 1996; 2019)[11].

The song has generated many variations in Ghana and beyond—always new and always the original song. Ghanaians speak of the reuse of traditional materials as *sankofa* which translates from the Twi language as roughly, "go back and take," or to retrieve and revive that which has been forgotten (Boateng 2011, 136–37). The concept is embodied in an Akan Adinkra symbol which portrays a bird with its feet facing forward and its face pointing backwards, protecting an egg which it carries on its back. Koo Nimo explains:

> Sankofa... Any aspect of culture that doesn't select the good practices of the past to replenish the present and cast a shadow into the future dies—or can't stand the test of time. Means people show the sankofa bird as two feet in the same position, casting a shadow… I mean if you retrieve, you will pick

[11] More regarding the identity of the woman Yaa Amponsah follows in Chapter II. Much of what is remembered of her is folkloric, and the more specific detail is the result of John Collins' research.

> something, it isn't a crime, it is the *order of the day*. You can pick something, and I see people with sankofa relate to bird with two feet just at the same place, and casting a shadow in the show of continuity. This is why we should pass on our little knowledge. Cast a shadow, into the future. (Nimo 2019)

But as central as the folkloric "Yaa Amponsah" song is to Ghanaian identity through the constant use and recreation of this cultural icon, there is little scholarship examining the song's history, influence, musical characteristics, transmission, and evolution. "Yaa Amponsah" is not one song, but rather presents in hundreds of variations—but how do we know it when we hear it? In addition, even though Amponsah is core to Ghanaian musical identity, it appears in repertoire under different names and with differing origin stories in Ghana and throughout West and Central Africa (Braddock 2019).

In this section, I have mapped my personal experience with *Amponsah*, Ghana music and musicians, and introduced some of the complexities that arise when we encounter musical materials that are rooted in folkloric history and undocumented paths transmission. In Chapter II I provide the history of early African guitar music and define the other palmwine song Rhythms that form the musical context in which *Amponsah* developed. In Chapter III, I present several paths of transmission of this music in multiple generations of musicians that span the colonial Gold Coast, early republicanism, the post-coup government of Flight Lieutenant Rawlings, and the contemporary nation. In Chapter IV, I transcribe, analyze, and organize *Amponsah's* musical components by drawing from archival and contemporary performances to provide an understanding of

what is core to the generation of the music. Finally, in Chapter V, I put this study into a larger context by analyzing several *Amponsah* compositions that—to the outsider—extrapolate the Rhythm out into a much wider field of music. Further, I present examples of *Amponsah* recorded in other nations, and open a discussion of the issues of folk art in the age of copyrighted intellectual property. This thesis positions palmwine music in the continuing discourse on African guitar in its social and musical contexts as African musical styles continue to evolve in the 21st century.

Literature Review

This thesis is grounded in writings by scholars whose work addresses issues in African popular music, transmission and circulation, and the encounter between Africans and westerners. Anyone writing about West African popular music does so in the footsteps of Professor John Collins. While J.H.K. Nketia will forever be "Prof" to Ghanaians, I think of Collins as the Dean of Highlife. He is widely cited by Ghanaian musicians as the authority on historical matters. The British-born scholar spent some time as a child living in the Gold Coast, and then moved permanently to Ghana in the late 1960s. He has since then been immersed in Ghanaian music—performing in bands and running the Bokoor recording studio, but also acting as historian, researcher, and preservationist[12].

[12] The existing Bokoor session and master tapes have all been digitized by Colter Harper in 2018-9, and he has been remixing some of this cache. Collins' archive is called the Bokoor African Popular Music Archives Foundation (BAPMAF) and is on the north side Greater Accra along the Kumasi Road.

His work benefits enormously from the close personal relationships he has had with Kwaa Mensah, Kwabena Nketia, Koo Nimo, and countless other pillars of Ghana music. As a fellow obroni[13] guitarist playing this music and moving in this culture I have looked to him for guidance, and he has always kindly opened his door to me. While not conventionally academic, Collins' *Highlife Time* is as comprehensive a history of Ghanaian popular music in its culture as exists for any West African nation, and its writing and structure ring with emic perspective (Collins 1996). Collins provides a historical context for *Amponsah* in his second chapter, and it is my hope to pull together his research with my own ethnography, musical analysis, and archival reconnaissance.

In addition to *Highlife Time*, Collins' essay, "'African Guitarism': One Hundred Years of West African Highlife" (Collins 2006) provides historical and musicological analysis of Africa's earliest guitar practices from the perspective of a musician who understands the landscapes of instrumental idiom and mechanical possibility. The more detailed transcriptions in my thesis aim to extend his work as well as to offer analytical tools for identifying the complexities of the *Amponsah* Rhythm. Like much of Collins' work, Chris Waterman's *Jújù* provided our field with a model for a contextualization and ethnographic analysis of musical genre as it works within a society (1990). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to do as comprehensive an analysis of

[13] Twi for "white man."

Amponsah and highlife as Waterman's work, my second chapter is informed by Waterman's archival research into the roots of Lagosian string band music. Likewise, my third chapter on modes of transmission is informed by his demonstration of musical genre as a social actor.

This thesis also draws from Michael Denning's *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution*, an examination of the birth of commercial recording and the distribution of recorded music beginning in the 1920s (2015). Specifically, Denning frames the earliest recordings of regional ethnic musics globally within the accelerating channels of sea travel, and discusses the epistemological change that occurs in a world where musicultural difference is amplified and absorbed. The Zonophone recordings of the Kumasi Trio which I introduce in Chapter II, and the records of the Trinidadian Lord Kitchener which I discuss in Chapter V, bookend the era of Denning's study. They illustrate the impact of both human and sonic migration between the cities of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. This moment of codification and transmission occurring in the creation of a sonic musical record is central to positioning *Amponsah* between its eras of a folkloric song that is "floating"—to borrow Koo Nimo's word—and a work that is nationalized and subsequently shared among generations of musicians.

In *The Copyright Thing Doesn't Work Here*, Boatema Boateng details the complexities of international intellectual property law when overlaid on a system of non-industrial culture work (2011). Boateng is primarily concerned with the

international appropriation and commercialization of folkloric Akan Adinkra symbols (like *sankofa*, which I discuss) and kente cloth. However, she also examines the organization of musicians under the MUSIGA musicians' union and how the protection of Ghanaian musical practice differs from the other traditional arts. My work is premised upon a national identity that emerges for musicians in the colonial Gold Coast and republican Ghana rather than a regional identity forged in earlier tribal musicking. She references the Paul Simon settlement, and I continue this conversation in Chapter V with my interview of the current National Folklore Board president, Nana Asante. I contextualize *Amponsah* in the NFB framework of folkloric intellectual property and how it is positioned in the contemporary global economy.

The work of Kofi Agawu provides an overarching point of intellectual and disciplinary reference for this thesis. In *The African Imagination In Music* (2016), Agawu further interrupts colonial notions of a monolithic "Africa," continuing the discussion that he introduced in his crucial article, "The Invention of 'African Rhythm'" (1995). In the 2016 book, Agawu strives to enumerate aesthetic elements that bind the musical practices of multiple African nations. As I investigate the transportation of Rhythms between coastal populations in the earliest days of African guitar music, Agawu's frameworks were crucial to my understanding of the "oneness" that many musicians from Ghana, Guinée, Sierra Leone, and Mali expressed to me and became central as I developed a narrative of dispersal and transmission. My approach to scholarship was influenced by the

delicacy of Agawu's awareness as he examines the musicking of village ensembles, art music composers, and contemporary popular musicians.

Methodology

The methodology for this paper combines the approaches of ethnographic interview, musical transcription, and analysis of archival recordings. I consider my own field recordings, readings in contemporary and archival musicology, and a bi-musical engagement with the music and with my interviewees.

My interviews were conducted both in the United States and in Ghana with musicians from multiple generations and nationalities. All interviews were conducted in English, with some passages in the Ghana languages Twi or Fante. In the case of Mamady Kouyate, parts of the interview were in French and in Mandingo. When I use a word in one of these foreign languages, I italicize the first appearance and offer a translation if I deem necessary. Subsequent uses in this thesis appear in normal font. The names of the Ghanaian Rhythms appear italicized and capitalized always, as discussed in my following section on terminology. I use all spellings commonly used in the country of origin. The Ghanaian letter "Ɔ" is a type of "o" and is pronounced "aw" as in "ought." The Ghanaian letter "ɛ" is a type of an "e," pronounced "eh" as in "get." I maintain the French words used by Kouyate. They are italicized and translated in brackets.

The eldest of my interviewees were Koo Nimo and Ebo Taylor—both in their eighties—followed by Professor John Collins and Smart Nkansah, both of whom came of age in the 1970s. Anthony Akablay's career begins in the 1980s and continues vibrantly to the present day. Other younger musicians I interviewed include Koo Nimo's acolyte George Spratz and palmwine revivalist Asah Nkansah, MUSIGA musicians' union president Bessa Simons, singer and bandleader Della Hayes, church musical director Ekow Paintsil, and jazz bassist Bright Osei.

The earliest of these interviews were conducted in 2008 with Akablay and Kwame Sarpong. Sarpong was an officer from the Ghanaian navy who had a great enthusiasm for Ghanaian culture. Upon his retirement he founded the *Ecomuseum of Cocoa* and the *Gramophone Records Museum and Research Center*, both in Cape Coast. As much as any experience I had in the course of my research, my meeting with Sarpong provided the germ for this thesis as he stressed the importance of "Yaa Amponsah" and of the Kumasi Trio. Sarpong, sadly, is now deceased. While some of these relationships began as early as 2008, the bulk of the interviews used in this paper were conducted during the month of August 2019 when I traveled between Accra, Kumasi, and the western coast of Ghana. Balla Kouyate and Mamady Kouyate (no immediate familial relation) both reside in the United States, and Loveliest "Kofi Elektrik" Addison was living in New Jersey while preparing to move to a house he had recently completed building in the Bubiashie district of Accra.

The musical transcriptions are all my own and are excerpted to illustrate key points that are idiomatic within longer performances. There is a significant amount of variation[14] over the course of a performance but no variations are aberrant within the style. While much of my past transcription work has been prescriptive—which is to say connected to my pedagogical and performance practice—these transcriptions are more descriptive, and sometimes reveal the idiosyncrasies and imperfections of real-world performance. Rather than compiling an ideal composite performance as I would for myself or my students to play, these extracts are as true to the source as my capabilities allow. As is convention for guitar notation, these parts appear upon the staff an octave higher than where they sound. The lowest playable C in guitar standard tuning is C_3, but is conventionally written as middle C_4.

While there has rightly been much discussion about the appropriateness of different notational methods for African and other traditions of musics, I use Western staff notation without hesitation for this project, albeit with full awareness of its limitations and compromises. The palmwine and highlife music under discussion employs the European-origin guitar as its principal instrument and incorporates several organizational principles from European music—most importantly the use of new triadic and chordal concepts and harmonic progressions within an African tradition of cyclicism. I am not arguing that

[14] I prefer the term "variation" to "improvisation" here because palmwine performances are meant to generate multiplicity across the cyclical format. Variation and development is the aesthetic, not novelty.

harmony did not exist in African music prior to its European introduction (Agawu 2016), but rather that these early African players adapted to the guitar's harmonic conventions in a way that other adopters of the instrument in different African populations did not. Western pitch notation works well because of this importance of fixed-pitch harmonies and the guitar-based vernacular in general. There is some necessary discussion of the placement of bar lines in Chapter IV. While this is also historically problematic, I feel it works for this music because of how palmwine builds upon song form, and not upon the complex polyphony of a folkloric percussion ensemble. Palmwine music, while having its feet in ancient and folkloric musicking, is in some ways West Africa's first modern music—a hybrid form born of transcontinental commerce and technological growth as much as traditional practice. In using European musical instruments, palmwine and highlife music are compatible with European notation.

Much of my work in this paper and before entering academia is founded upon the principle of bi-musicality (Hood 1960). Palmwine music is a guitar-based idiom, and an accurate understanding of how these compositions work requires an understanding of the instrument's harmonic and kinetic logics. As any guitarist who has been given a chart written by a horn player can tell you, the guitar has its own way of working, and this necessarily frames our understanding of how the music operates as illustrated in Chapters IV and V. I have taught and professionally performed music fulltime since 2003 and have been performing African musical styles with African musicians since 2005. Over

many years, I have wrestled with the instrument itself and with the different the techniques and aesthetics that reside in various musical practices.

Reflexivity

The ethnomusicological project always invites—and I would say requires—the writer to assess their place within the story they are trying to tell: their influence—passive or active—upon the work and upon those with whom they interact. As Melchor-Barz and Cooley articulated, everyone casts shadows (2008). My involvement in this music began as a performer, musical collaborator, and friend. The interweaving of these roles is a central concern to those ethnomusicologists who dedicate their lives to studying the music they love—"our very being merges with the 'field' through our bodies and voices, and another Self-Other boundary is dissolved" (Kisliuk 2008, 183).

My own involvement in African music developed in stages. As a high school student, I began making cassette recordings of the very earliest *Afropop* programs from our local public radio station. I was just beginning to play guitar, and for numerous cultural reasons I felt very much an outsider in my hometown. I identified with the "difference" exemplified in the musical approach I heard in the guitar playing of Docteur Nico and Sekou Bembeya Diabate. The impact of these musicians was clearly audible in my own playing as I matured and developed.

By my thirties I was a fulltime musician and a teacher at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music. Knowing of my interest in this music, the program director insisted on listing an African guitar class in our course catalog—against my wishes! The class ran once, and then continued to run. I branched out into African acoustic and electric classes and ran an eighteen-player student ensemble that performed popular music from across the continent. At the OTSFM I co-taught masterclasses with African musicians like Koo Nimo, Sidi Toure, and Tinariwen's Abdallah Ag Alhousseyni. I taught workshops and gave lectures at universities and music festivals in Europe, the US, Australia, and New Zealand.

At the insistence of my students, I started a band to play this style of music. One student suggested the name, "the Occidental Brothers"[15] (to which I added Dance Band International), and also "Code 419" as a reference to the Nigerian legal code in charge of email fraud. This second suggestion was shrewd and has always held a pinch of the sobering truth for me as a white American and as an interloper in the practice of African music. For all of the successes I've had composing and performing African styles on big stages from the Montreal Jazz Festival to the Kennedy Center, for all of the collaborations with African musicians, and for all the times I've been told "You are a *real* African!" (or Ghanaian, etc.), I will never have been raised in the tradition, will always bring a

[15] A riff on the *Oriental Brothers* band, so named for being from the eastern region of Nigeria.

different aesthetic and analytical approach, and will always be lacking the full social and cultural meaning of the music. In truth, those testimonials to my authenticity as an African always rang a little hollow for me—while the speaker meant to express some real admiration and praise, they seemed designed to please me. The one complement I hold on to came from the Congolese guitar giant Diblo Dibala who came to see us at Le Poisson Rouge in New York City. After our set, he begrudgingly told me "you have the rhythm. There was once another white man, from Britain, who had it." He did not smile at me once, but I was glowing on the inside. Even if I had made progress over the years, I understood the ways my knowledge would always be limited. One can become knowledgeable, but one can never transform into an insider.

A year after our launch, the Occidental Brothers Dance Band Int'l was sharing bills with African bands and I was approached by a number of African musicians who wanted to play with us. Several Ghanaians joined the group, most notably trumpeter Kofi Cromwell who became our first singer and the great drummer Asamoah Rambo. It was Rambo who urged me to go to Ghana and I made my first trip in January of 2008. My fieldwork trip in August of 2019 was my fifth trip there. On each of these trips I was met at Accra's Kotoka Airport by Rambo and Kofi's old bandmate[16] and my good friend, Akablay.

[16] Rambo, Kofi, Kofi's brother Kwesi, and Akablay were all members Ghana's top band of the 1990s, *The Western Diamonds*, so named for their home base in Takoradi in the Western Region. I visited the hotel where they rose to prominence, though it is now closed. We found Rambo's old drum kit abandoned by the side of the road.

Aka gave me my first lessons in proper Ghana-style guitar, and I will always be indebted to him. I will never forget the moment at the end of my first visit when we were performing in Osu and Aka took off his guitar during the last set and had me lead the band. Granted, the singer called many simpler *Osede* songs, but there were also many of the vexingly complicated Si*kyi* style songs that I had so longed to learn. While I was many years away from academic ethnomusicology at this time, this balance of study, performance, and friendship would define all of my trips.

While I had come to learn, there were things wanted from me, as well, as the imagined American. My own original music was met quizzically and with confusion, whereas a performance of American blues or a country song would be met with great approval and delight. This exchange of gazes is interesting—both sets of eyes are seeking to see/hear a dream fulfilled. Our expectations are likewise met and unmet. For me, I was seeking something "real" and "authentic," but often found musicians who were more interested in smooth jazz sounds, gospel synthesizers, or simply for help to come to America. I was expected to be proficient in the mainstream American musics that I mostly avoided (country, mainstream rock) and to be both wealthy and connected—the bringer of opportunity. While we were both guilty of indulging in certain post-colonial fantasies, the presumed balance of power was not what I anticipated, nor was it in any way simple.

The friendships were real, the music was good, and the musicking was familiar. As with much fieldwork, there were arguments, misunderstandings, and long-form expectations which I have not been able to fulfill (Titon 2008). Akablay has repeatedly ghosted me at critical moments when I needed to travel between cities or lock in big plans. Similarly, he has been waiting for me to deliver that invitation to tour and release music in the United States—a wish that I have been unable to help fulfill. I also had a dramatic break (later mended) with Kofi and Rambo in the Occidental Brothers that was founded upon more unspoken expectations and assumptions, as well as upon their upbringing in a West African music scene dominated by band owners and strong men.[17] We were incredibly successful for what we were—but an African style band in America will always be on the margins, even if we played at the Pitchfork Festival[18]. Kofi wanted to sing more in English, but the American band members did not think it led to good music. We were in constant negotiation with our inherent hybridizations and with our independent fantasies of what the music should be and what success would look like.

It was with Kofi as it was with Akablay. They both sought a modern hybrid music that had the alleged sophistication of Western music and hoped to reach a wider Western audience. But I felt that such music lacked an

[17] President Rawlings would send a car for young Rambo to bring to his residency and the band repeatedly travelled abroad with the president.
[18] Pitchfork is a leading source for contemporary music journalism. At the time of our performance, an invitation to perform at its annual festival was the most desirable endorsement for underground and indie rock artists globally.

authenticity that American world music audiences craved. I understood that my position was problematic, and I have never interfered with Aka's output. He once told me that if a Ghanaian guitarist plays too much in the highlife style without elements of smooth jazz or rock, that he is considered "too local," but for me the local music is what makes the Ghanaian, or any tradition, interesting and worth celebrating.

Terminology

Several terms require definition to clarify their meaning within this paper. In Ghana, the song title "Yaa Amponsah" is used to refer to both an understanding of an original song and then to all songs that are modeled upon its lyrical, rhythmic, melodic, and/or harmonic conventions. The name comes from the original song as recorded by the Kumasi Trio, and inscribed on the 78rpm disk's label as "Amponsah - Part 1." Yaa Amponsah is a woman's name—Amponsah being a common family name, and Yaa indicated a Thursday-born female.[19] Without exception, the two halves of the name are elided to sound as "*yaamponsah.*" Further, the music is often referred to by musicians like Koo Nimo simply as *Amponsah*. Therefore, when referring to the specific original song I will call it "Yaa Amponsah" (or whatever specific spelling is used) using quotation marks. When referring to a derivative form of the "rhythm" I will use

[19] In the Akan culture, there are gendered names for each day of the week, and these names have associations—Yaa/Yaw is associated with the Earth. There are variations of these names among the Fante, Ashanti, and other Akan tongues. Many of these names have been incorporated into global culture or are widely known, such as Kofi (Friday-born male), Kwame (Saturday-born male), and Kobe (Tuesday-born male).

the italicized term *Amponsah*, though in conversation with Ghanaian musicians this distinction is not necessarily made (and again note that the first two recordings are themselves only titled "Amponsah"). There are some few other examples of a specific song defining a genre or subgenre or music. Jay Pillay reminded me that South Africans use "mbube" in this way to indicate the song, the performance style, and the genre defined by the Solomon Linda recording (Pillay 2020). The "rhythm changes" composed upon by Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and so many others, receives its name from George Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm"—though I would not consider this to be a genre or style so much as a form.

It is now important to clarify my use of the word "rhythm"—one of the most problematic linguistic puzzlers of this paper. *Rhythm* as a concept is problematic, for in truth to say "rhythm" is to engage a multitude of overlapping or tangential concepts. In *The Invention of 'African Rhythm',* Kofi Agawu writes that the Ewe of eastern Ghana have no word for "rhythm," though clearly their drum ensemble tradition (Agawu 1995, 387) is among the most sophisticated and best studied in our world. They have many words for rhythmic and musical concepts, but they do not have an equivalent singular word. The English word is—I would contend—over-burdened and forced to shoulder too many interlocking concepts on its own.

Among the Ghanaian musicians I spoke to, there is a different and highly specific meaning for "rhythm" which is related to this "Yaa Amponsah" vs

Amponsah distinction mentioned above. When a Ghanaian musician calls something "a rhythm," they mean a music that is inclusive of harmonic progression, harmonic rhythm, melodic contour, rhythmic structure, style, and form. The best analog I could think of for my students was to imagine an American 12-Bar Blues, but only if there were a first 12-bar blues song to which people could point.[20] There are necessarily many opportunities for variation and innovation, but there is also a core set of essential elements that must be present in some combination to make the thing what it is—otherwise, it's not the thing.

It was also suggested to me by Professor David Locke to investigate a relationship to the Jamaican term *riddim*. This is a compelling comparison, but with one key difference: while the Ghanaian Rhythms are recorded, it is ultimately about live performance. The Jamaican riddim is a creation of the sound system and studio. While a musical theme can appear as part of many discrete performances—as in the opening motif of Dawn Penn's "No, No, No"—a "riddim" refers to the reuse and re-combination of a single recorded backing track performance with many improvised and composed performances

[20] Some years later I would read John Collins draw the same comparison in his article "African Guitarism" (Collins 2006). I think it is important to note that both African American blues and palmwine develop immediately before commercially recorded music and are then documented and distributed widely, aiding to disperse musical models more quickly and across a wider area. George Spratz made this comparison for *Amponsah*: "Like the 12-bar blues is to jazz" (Spratz 2019).

superimposed upon and—in the case of the dub artist—manipulated from within the foundational recording.

I posit that when the Ghanaian guitarist says "rhythm," they are referring to something more like what is found in the repertoire of the folkloric drum ensemble. I think it is best to compare a Rhythm like *Amponsah* to a broadly defined drumming piece such as David Locke outlines in his online publication, *Agbadza: The Critical Edition* (Locke 2012). In this collaborative work, Locke works with the master drummer Gideon Foli Alorwoyie to categorize a large inventory of instrumental and vocal materials that are presented as the drum piece Agbadza. Specifically, Alowoyie and Locke present twenty-five "items," or combinations of drum variations and lyrical songs. These twenty-five settings each present Agbadza, and will have common musical elements at their foundation—notably the bell timeline, instrumentation, and lyrical themes—as well as differences such as texts and scalar materials, and may be combined in different configurations.

Amponsah differs from Agbadza in that the drum piece denotes specific instrumentation and historical performance contexts, but I think that comparing these two musics or Rhythms brings us closer to an understanding of the Ghanaian guitarist's philosophy and purpose when using this word. In this paper, when I use the word rhythm in standard font, non-capitalized, I am employing it for its customary western musicological meanings of how musical sound events appear—their onset and completion—within the timeline of a

phrase. When I capitalize the word Rhythm, I am employing the Ghanaian usage and imply a set of harmonic, rhythmic, melodic, and structural elements that provide a foundation and template for the composition of new music based upon a shared cultural understanding. To conclude, "Yaa Amponsah" is a song, and *Amponsah* is a Rhythm.

Chapter II: Histories Known and Unknown

"Yaa Amponsah" is a song that every Ghanaian musician knows implicitly, but what is it that they know? While many know of the earliest version by the Kumasi Trio, very few recognize this recording when they hear it. If this record is not a direct point of reference, then what are the elements that bind together to form the knowledge of *Amponsah*, and what can we establish about the history of this music? In this chapter, I present the roots and context of *Amponsah* within Africa's earliest recorded guitar music and examine differing approaches to understanding the song's origins.

Coastal Exchange

Palmwine[21] is a musical style that developed in multiple sites along the coast of West Africa—notably Freetown, Lagos, and Cape Coast in the colonial Gold Coast. It was a social music that accompanied gatherings of men who would drink palm wine and be entertained. Palm wine is a moderately alcoholic drink made from the liquid of the palm tree, fermented quickly in the hot climate, and served in calabashes. The music was typically performed solo or by small ensembles mixing traditional African percussion with imported instruments. At its center was the guitar, though there are instances of

[21] I opt to use the spelling *palmwine* because it is used by John Collins in his writings and by Chris Waterman in his monograph, *Jújù: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (Waterman 1990). For the drink that gives the music its name, I separate the two words: "palm wine."

concertina, violin, mandolin, and, banjo, along with the Ghanaian prempensua, adakim, clips, and frikyiwa.

Palmwine is in the first generation of African guitar musics (Andrew L. Kaye 2008). It is historically associated with the seafaring Kru[22] people of modern Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Kru are reputed to have journeyed for centuries along great distances of the African coast. Collins states that frequently their trips would last for a year or more before returning to their homeland (2006, 174–75). The knowledge the Kru acquired as coastal navigators made them valuable to European traders who hired them to work on their ships as early as the 17th century. It is commonly believed that the Kru began to travel with Portuguese traders and it is understood that in the course of these interactions the Kru mariners first encountered the guitar—however, documentation of this musical interaction is scare at best[23] . It is understood

[22] Or "Kroo".

[23] It is problematic that in none of the existing musical literature is the specific nature of the European and Kru trade on the African coast discussed. Schmidt writes that the Kru began aiding the Portuguese in the 1600s, and the British in the 18th century, and that they would sail not just the coast but as far as Britain and the Caribbean (2008, 110). The history of European and Africa interaction has much ugliness, including most significantly the Atlantic slave trade. We know that slavery was an enormous industry for several European nations for much of this period, and we also note the triangular route of Africa-Americas-Britain slaving ships that Schmidt mentions without mentioning the slave trade. While the United States and Great Britain would ban the importation of African slaves in 1807, illicit importation continued in the States and legal importation continued in other parts of the Americas.

The Ghanaian coast had many large slave forts that passed between European nations as regional control shifted. One of the largest still stands in the Fante city of Cape Coast—the home of the Kumasi Trio, and the site where Kwame Asare was taught guitar by Liberian seamen in the early 20th century (Collins 1996, 7). None of the Ghanaians made mention of the specific trade that the Kru were involved in, and at the time of my interviews I did not think to ask. The slave trade would have been long out of living memory at the time of Asare's encounter with the Kru, and I am not suggesting that my Ghanaian interviewees were withholding information—they probably did not know. We do know that many Africans participated in the slave trade, and

that the Kru learned to play the European guitar and began to create a hybridized musical style that pleased both the Europeans and Kru sailors as they travelled. In the *Garland Handbook of African Music*, Andrew Kaye and Cynthia Schmidt present a compelling narrative of this earliest era and its music (2008). The Kru spread their musical inventions and the use of these new instruments to other communities as they navigated the African Atlantic coast.

Musicians in different ports along the trade routes adopted the music of the Kru and of the foreign instrument along with the instrument's musical principles, and adapted their local music-making practices and string instrument techniques to create Africa's first guitar music tradition. In Ghana specifically, this music was known by the Fante name *osibisaaba* (Collins 2006, 178), and by the 1940s it had developed into urban dance band and guitar band *highlife*.

Among musicians, this history is preserved anecdotally and held loosely in communal memory. The leader of the Kumasi Trio, Kwame Asare, was said to have been taught by Liberians when he was growing up in Cape Coast in the early twentieth century (Collins 1996, 7). This information comes from Asare's nephew, Kwaa Mensah, himself a famous musician. Asare performed under the name "Jacob Sam," and Ghanaian guitarists refer to him simply as "Sam." Asare is credited by most people as the composer of "Yaa Amponsah." Akablay and

there are references to the Kru working on slaving ships (Juang and Morrissette 2008, 674), though I have not researched the extent or veracity of this information. This is an enormous and important topic, and outside the scope of this paper, but I cannot in good conscience contribute to the academic silence on this matter.

Koo Nimo both state that the Sierra Leoneans were the first African guitarists and introduced the foundational guitar Rhythms to Ghana. However, in Sierra Leone and Liberia much memory of the music is lost. Akablay explains:

> This was brought from Sierra Leone, long long long time. The Sierra Leoneans were playing it long before Ghanaians thought of playing. It's a style and a progression in the African system for that long… They don't have the history at all! They don't have the history at all. So they just wanted to do something like Ghana Rhythm, and… A journalist from Ghana intentionally went to Sierra Leone and wanted to know exactly if the Rhythm belongs to them. He went, ask every corner in Sierra Leone. All the tribes: they said they don't have anything! Don't have that Rhythm at all, and that Rhythm is coming from Ghana. (Akablay 2019a)

The music that is preserved on these first audio recordings of the 1920s harkens to the earliest era of palmwine music, but we can hear a tremendous amount of synthesis, modernization and hybridization developing in the tracks of this era. Since the late 19th century, Africans from the Americas had been returning and bringing their own music, and in some Ghanaian guitarists there are already elements of jazz and blues playing. I also note the presence of the African American banjo on many early coastal recordings. With the increased ease of communication via radio and record and of faster transportation, the world was modernizing quickly (Denning 2015).

I spoke with guitarist Ashade Pearce of the Sierra Leone Refugee All-Stars to see if he could help me map the Sierra Leone-Liberia-Ghana connection. He is well-traveled and a sophisticated musician, fluent in the styles of many countries. The Sierra Leoneans' contemporary palmwine music is associated

with players like S.E. Rougie[24], but when I played him the Ghanaian palmwine *Amponsah* songs to see if there was a connection, he identified it as definitively of Ghana origin. Aka continues:

> This Yaa Amponsah and Kwaw things were first recorded commercially by Ghanaians. Commercially, it was recorded back, and Ghanaians took the Rhythm as your own. So, then you have to document it, know the history about it, and keep it as ours. So if you talk of "Yaa Amponsah" and this *Kwaw* things, the whole world—everybody know it is Ghanaians. Even Sierra Leone knows it is Ghanaians who plays it. But we know that this was brought to us by Sierra Leoneans. (Akablay 2019a)

The knowledge that Ghanaian musicians have about the roots of their music are preserved anecdotally by Aka and others, and it is hard to know definitively where specific pieces originate. However, there is a core understanding of the exchange and interconnection among these groups during the pre-colonial era that is echoed by many of the musicians I interviewed from Mali, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Guinée[25].

The Palmwine Rhythms

As discussed in the introduction, for the Ghanaian musician—and specifically the guitarist or highlife player—the word English word "rhythm" refers to more than the spatial arrangement of notes within a timeline. For these musicians, a Rhythm dictates a complete but variable mode of musical

[24] Note that the recordings of Sooliman Ernest Rogers (S.E. Rogie) begin in the 1960s and are attributed to multiple spellings of his name.
[25] In the 20th century, guitars propagated more rapidly and widely in the continent. Many were brought back to Francophone nations following the First World War, and others were imported by Greek merchants (Stewart 2000).

operation: a harmonic progression, form, melodic convention, with central and accompanying rhythmic components. There are a many palmwine Rhythms, and it seems that most guitarists do not use—or even know how to play—them all. Perhaps this reveals regional stylistic bias, or as likely it is the product of each guitarist's teachers. In some cases, Rhythm names vary from scene to scene, and individuals develop a personal vernacular that is the product of the conventions of those who taught them and of their own invention. Below follows an inventory of five of the most important osibisaaba or palmwine Rhythms. Ghanaians may also include *Rekpetteh* (a traditional Nzema rhythm), *Osede* (a song form of the Fante fishermen), and *Double G* (which developed later and I discuss in Chapter IV) in a list of palmwine forms. There are palmwine traditions in Nigeria and Sierra Leone with other Rhythms, but I do not discuss them here.

Fireman

Fireman is one of the oldest Rhythms, but not one played by Koo Nimo or Akablay. Presumably the name "Fireman" is a reference to the mariners who would stoke the engines of the great steamships which appear in Africa in the mid-1800s, so we can assume that this guitar Rhythm appears in the late in the 19th or early 20th century. Colter Harper, an American professor in the University of Ghana (Legon) Department of Music, had learned this Rhythm when he was an undergraduate student on exchange in this department. At that time, the guitar instructor was T.O. Jazz, a Ghanaian guitarist who traveled a widely and even performed for a time with the legendary Franco et le TPOK Jazz in Zaïre.

Mainline

Akablay thinks of *Mainline* as any of the Rhythms—most specifically *Amponsah*—but played "straight," without variation. Koo Nimo has a specific theme that he thinks of as *Mainline*, and like his *Amponsah* illustrated later it is a bass motif[26]. The harmonic progression is very similar to *Amponsah*, and it is also played most commonly in the key of C. *Mainline*, however, is less rhythmically sophisticated and missing many of the compositional hallmarks of *Amponsah* that I discuss in Chapter IV. I asked Koo Nimo what distinguished *Mainline* from *Amponsah*. "Simple," he emphasized to me. "You use it in arpeggio form. They were not harmonizing" (Nimo 2019). I expand on this issue at greater length in Chapter IV, but suffice it to say that while the harmonic underpinning of the two Rhythms is similar, *Amponsah* is characterized by a specific vocabulary of rhythmic complexities, elaborations, and variations, all or which are absent in *Mainline*.

John Collins sees *Mainline* as the direct antecedent for "Yaa Amponsah." In his article, "African Guitarism," he theorizes that the innovative syncopations of *Amponsah* were developed as a complimentary second guitar part for *Mainline* (Collins 2006). Collins argues compellingly that the idiomatic *Amponsah* guitar developed to interlock with the principal *Mainline* Rhythm in a manner akin to complimentary drum patterns in a percussion ensemble. George

[26] You can hear Koo Nimo playing his signature *Mainline* on the Shanachie cd, *African Troubadours*, but it is not a Rhythm in which he normally performs or composes.

Williams Aingo is a Ghanaian who recorded traditional and popular music for the Zonophone label in 1927 shortly before the Kumasi Trio recorded, and he uses the *Mainline* Rhythm in his guitar tracks.

Dagomba

Dagomba is thought to derive its name from the Liberian phrase "Dagomba Waye Tangebu," and not from the Dagomba region of northern Ghana—which can be a source of some confusion. But it is important to remember that palmwine music is a coastal tradition, and there is little connection with the interior. Cynthia Schmidt reports that the phrase is the title of a Kru song title in Pidgin English and means that a ship called The Dagomba sent a telegraph (or a 'wire') to a seaman named Tangebu (Schmidt 2008). The linguistic source for the ship's name, "Dagomba," is not mentioned, and she does not suggest year of origin, but given the reference to the telegraph, we can assume the Rhythm dates to late 19th or early 20th century.

Dagomba is considered one of the older Rhythms and is marked by a steadily moving quarter-note bassline. It moves from tonic to dominant, **I** to **V**, but can also land on other bass notes and chords in between. The presence of these variations is typically determined by the key of the *Dagomba* because the key's position dictates what is readily and idiomatically at hand for the player. For example, Koo Nimo plays *Dagomba* in A at the fifth fret (no capo[27]) and it is

[27] The capo is a transposition tool described in Chapter IV.

essentially a measure of A and a measure of E^7. His Dagomba in C has twice as much harmonic movement, though it appears effortlessly beneath the player's fingers:

|C Am **|**Dm G^7 **|**

His *Dagomba* in E moves to the **IV** chord in the second half of the first measure, and Koo also plays it in a minor when he wishes, changing only the third of the tonic chord (G♯ becomes G).

Ɔdɔ Nsan and Kwaa (Kwaw)

While Schmidt argues that the roots of these first Rhythms is in the music of the Kru and coastal exchange, the *Ɔdɔ Nsan*[28] style is more tied to Akan musical practice of Central Ghana. Akablay translates it as "love [ɔdɔ] brews." It is Koo Nimo's preferred Rhythm, and the song that he considers to be his signature tune, "Buy When Death Sells (Owuo Ton Adee a to Bi)" in an *Ɔdɔ Nsan*. John Collins suggests that "*Ashanti Blues*" is an alternative name for *Ɔdɔ Nsan* (Collins 2006, 182), but I have not myself heard this term used among Ghanaian players and do not know its origin[29].

[28] The letter "Ɔ" is one of the Ghana versions of our "O," and is pronounced "aw."

[29] Collins cites Nketia's use of the word "Blues" which appears in the 1957 article "Modern Trends in Ghana Music." Nketia uses it in a brief reference to the slower tunes played by the horn-based dance bands of the era (Nketia 1957, 15). It is possible that I have not encountered the term because of the generation and style of players who used the term is different from those with whom I've worked. It is my own bias, but—as with the term "desert blues" for Malian music—I feel that employing the word "blues" for an African music style imposes a American or European aesthetic and am skeptical of the motivations or benefit. If this terminology was used by dance band musicians, it might be another way in which they were embracing jazz elements into their musical identity, though Nketia notes that they play "without the blue notes." My

What distinguishes an *Ɔdɔ Nsan* is its use of only two chords that are one diatonic degree apart in the heptatonic scale. For example, Akablay plays the Rhythm as a C or C^7 followed by a D^{min} or D^{min7}. Koo's "Buy When Death Sells" is also C, but it moves to G^7/D which is effectively the same harmony when you factor in ornamental notes. Koo's song also flips back and forth between the two chords, though more frequently, creating the *Ɔdɔ Nsan*'s distinctive harmonic rhythm:

$$|C\ G^7\ C\ /\ |G^7\ C\ G^7\ /\ |$$

Another common style of *Ɔdɔ Nsan* sits in a Lydian tonality. This following example—still in C Major—maintains the same shifting between two tonal centers, one degree apart in the scale.

$$|E^{min}\ /\ F\ E^{min}\ |F \quad |F\ /\ E^{min}\ F\ |E^{min} \quad |$$

Koo Nimo calls this style "modal" and often plays it in an Adowa 6/8 rhythm. Akablay and many other younger musicians play it mostly in 4/4 time and call the style "Kwaw," after Kwaa Mensah[30].

I realized that *Ɔdɔ Nsan* is an adaptation from the music of the Akan's ancient seprewa harp. None of my interviewees mentioned this, but perhaps for them it is too obvious a fact to warrant discussion. The seprewa is a two-course harp with a wooden box resonator and a two-sided wooden bridge that rests on

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other encounter with the word is a quote attributed to Jewel Ackah in *African Rock*, using the word to describe Kwaa Mensah's playing (Stapleton and May 1990, 56).

[30] Note that Aka favors "Kwaw" as the spelling, but Collins and I believe Mensah himself used "Kwaa." Aka also pronounces it with more of an "-ow" sound. For these two reasons I maintain the different spellings for the style and the musician.

a goatskin head, resembling a smaller, more portable version of the Mande kora. The strings would once have been vine, but now are fishing line. While *Ɔdɔ Nsan* has been a vibrant song mode for guitarists, performance upon the traditional instrument had all but disappeared before Osei Korankye began to revive the music of his grandfather who had been one of the seprewa's last players. Korankye told me that palmwine music dates to the 16th or 17th century and to instruments like his family's seprewa, and long predated the arrival of the guitar. He demonstrated his preferred tuning which gives four strings to the right hand, tuned to the scale tones 1 – 3 – 5 - 7, and four strings to the left hand, tuned 2 – 4 – 6 – 8 (Korankye 2018). The music of the seprewa freely passes the harmony from one hand to the other, creating the same rapid shifting of triads or chords that we see in other examples of *Ɔdɔ Nsan.*

Yaa Amponsah

Yaa Amponsah or *Amponsah* is relatively more modern than *Dagomba*, *Mainline*, and *Fireman*, and the Kumasi Trio's 1928 recording is recognized as its moment of codification. Thus far in this chapter, I have considered musical forms that precede *Amponsah*'s appearance. In my following chapters, I consider how the *Amponsah* Rhythm developed from the time of this key recording and onward. As noted above, *Amponsah* is closely related to *Mainline*, but its origin is later, presumably in the 1920s, possibly written by Kwame Asare of the Kumasi Trio, and possibly not composed but rather codified by him. It is certainly the most influential of the Rhythms and is treated with a unique

reverence that places it at the center of highlife music. *Amponsah* incorporates uniquely Ghanaian elements—specifically the "up-up-up" that the cobbler was tapping. We will see how that and other components in *Amponsah* distinguish it from other Rhythms in Chapter IV.

Yaa Amponsah, the Lady in Question

One of the mysteries at the center of the *Amponsah* Rhythm is a person, and here I ask: was there truly a Yaa Amponsah who was the subject of this song? Aka once told me had a photo of her, and I believe that John Collins says he once saw a photo in a newspaper clipping. Tantalizing, but each is lost—and does it matter if there was a singular and actual Yaa Amponsah? It was a common enough name, and though our impulse as historians is to look for her, it is uncertain what we would find. Nevertheless, the investigation reveals something of the world in which the song was born. Four questions remain central: who was Yaa Amponsah, who was the person who wrote the song, what deeper meanings might be revealed by the answers to these questions, and why is it that we concern ourselves with trying to answer them?

Akablay has repeated his origin story to me, and a version appears in the manuscript to his unpublished guitar method book. In August he laid it out for me again:

> It's a lady who was selling palm wine and was going to the bush to take the palm wine from the palm wine tappers, and then bring it the joint where guys would be sitting and drinking and having fun. The man who moved from Cape Coast. He learned this Yaa

> Amponsah Rhythm… Is Jacob Sam[31]. And then he learned it from this Sierra Leoneans and then the mother said no, he is being a truant… So they move into Apedwua where the uncle lived, they wanted him to school there. So this man went there with his guitar and then he did not go to school. He went to where the palm wine joint is, he sit down and play for people to have fun and get some drink and then go. So, this woman who brings the palm wine from the farms: she's called Yaa Amponsah. But she's got a nice back[32]! So Sam, who is [plays Amponsah Rhythm] and says, "Yaa Amponsah, if I look at your back, I will leave my wife. I'll leave my marriage! Yaa Amponsah, I will leave my marriage…" So that is a story that this Uncle Attah told me. And Uncle Attah knew one of them, knew the Kumasi Trio. So it's a direct story told by one of the bandsmen to Uncle Attah. (Akablay 2019a)

Here are some of the things that Aka's story tells us: (1) the composer is Jacob Sam and he is from Cape Coast; (2) he learned to play from the Sierra Leoneans and this *Amponsah* Rhythm is from them; (3) Sam is a boy, and is sent upcountry and away from the coast into Ashanti-land for schooling and disciplining; (4) the song is about palm wine, or takes the palm wine station as site; and (5) the lyrics of the song address issues of marriage and fidelity. Note that Apedwua is a village past Accra on the way to Kumasi.

When I asked Koo Nimo for the origin of the song, he quoted an anecdote attributed to the Englishman W.E. Ward, the source of which is an anonymous article in the 1990 first issue of the Ghana Copyright News (*Ghana Copyright News* 1990, 5):

[31] Sam, or Jacob Sam, is Kwame Asare, the Kumasi Trio singer and presumed composer of "Yaa Amponsah."
[32] Her "back" is her rear end!

> The incident that they, Mr. Ward, the topic for his thesis happened like this: "In November 1924, I was walking at night on a street at Kyebi"—the British say "Kibby," but it was Kyebi[33]. And he heard a man sitting outside his house in the moonlight playing "Yaa Amponsah" on the guitar. "I was so struck by the rhythm that my friends had difficulty in getting me away." "Yaa Amponsah" was a *sensation* in his time. And its composer, this is now true, was taken to London to record it in about 1922-23-24... They one of the first, first ever recording of Gold Coast Highlife. (Nimo 2019)

Koo's story is interesting, and here is what it is telling us: (1) the site of the composition is Kyebi, which is very close to Apedwua; (2) the composer is a guitarist and is the man who recorded it in the 1920s, i.e. Jacob Sam; and (3) the song is noteworthy for the rhythmic sophistication of the guitar and there is no mention of the lyric or melody. Koo has definite opinions about the music, but there are also times like this when he respectfully cites a source of record, a professor or article, and keeps his own thoughts to himself. I return to his perspectives below in Chapter III.

W.E. Ward was an Englishman living in the Accra area and is the first person to discuss "Yaa Amponsah" in print. His article, "Music in the Gold Coast" appeared in 1927—one year before the Kumasi Trio's recording session. I was able to locate the original article in a volume of the *Gold Coast Review* in an uncatalogued archive at the University of Ghana. Ward writes that it is the "best known tune in the Gold Coast" (Ward 1927, 205), and we can deduct from his transcriptions that he thought of it as a group vocal song as he makes no

[33] The "ky-" sound resembles our "ch-."

mention of instrumental accompaniment nor conveys an awareness of a palmwine setting. Ward states that he sources most of the music in his article from his students at Accra's Achimota College[34]. The song, for Ward, is essentially the chorus of "Yaa Amponsah gyae aware," and states that any verse or soloist passage was likely improvised and non-essential to the song. The article has three brief transcriptions of the song, but does not include the story recounted by Koo Nimo and the *Copyright News*, nor any mention of Apedwua, Kyebi, guitar, or the meaning of this bit of lyrics although does write that the music is not "regarded as anything but a vehicle for the words." Ward understood it was more of a street song, possibly with many regional variations across the country. This could be true even if the piece were initially composed by Kwame Asare/Jacob Sam. It could also be that he took a lyric that was afield in the culture as the source for his arrangement and composition.

John Collins' research also places the personage of Yaa Amponsah and the song's origin in Apedwua. Yaa was the sister or wife[35] of a cocoa broker. She was known for hosting parties and for teaching European ballroom dancing. European and African dance aesthetics are quite different, and the closeness and physical touch of European dance was thought by Ghanaians to be less moral than traditional African dance forms. The ballroom was also the site of the

[34] Note that this was more of a trade school for adolescent age boys, and not a university in our contemporary use of the word. This is also true of Adisadel College, which Koo Nimo discusses in Chapter III. Students had to be of some financial means to attend.
[35] In our conversation he told me wife, in *Highlife Time* he writes sister, though clearly she could have been sister to one broker and wife to another.

development of dance band highlife in the midcentury, and a place where many European and African values were being encountered, negotiated, and hybridized. In his article on "African Guitarism," Collins attributes much of this version of the history to a lecture given by Beattie Casley-Hayford in1987, but I was unable to locate a transcript or identify her sources.

In *Highlife Time* Collins suggests that the song was in the air for at least ten years before the Kumasi Trio's recording (Collins 1996, 8). Deeper in my conversations with Koo Nimo he too suggested that, "Sam wasn't the composer of Yaa Amponsah—it was a traditional tune—the composer is not known. It was floating." Even so, I would draw the conclusion from my conversations with Koo, Collins, and others that Kwame Asare was the composer and arranger of this specific version's variations that were recorded, and therefore he is credited as the composer of the song that we know. The Trio were traveling musicians and would likely have traveled to perform in Apedwua and many other cities. George Spratz tells me, "I know of these three itinerant musicians. Jacob Sam, H.E. Biney, and Kwah Kanta[36] who used to play for this cocoa broker" (Spratz 2019). While components of the song may have been floating in the culture, it was their version that became codified because it was recorded. We can think of it as similar to the work of the African-American musician Robert Johnson in

[36] These are the three members of Kumasi Trio.

combining and concretizing sets of musical elements—not for composing and inventing, but for perfecting the form.

The Original Recording

The Kumasi Trio were a group of three Fante musicians: Kwame Asare (performing as "Jacob Sam") on lead vocals and guitar, H.E. Biney also on guitar, and Kwah Kanta on percussion—usually clips or a large wooden box drum called the *adakim*. The Fante lived along the western coast of modern Ghana from the Côte d'Ivoire border in the west, and eastward towards Accra, which is the seat of the Ga people. Asare is from Saltpond, and the Trio are associated with the nearby port city of Cape Coast where he spent his final years. Cape Coast has been a trading post for Europeans since the 1600s and has a large and well-preserved slaving fort that is an attraction for American tourists today. Many of the components of the origin stories ring true.

The Trio was taken to London to record for the Zonophone label in 1928, and the sessions produced two *Amponsahs*—Parts 1 & 2—which occupy the two sides of the EZ1001 78rpm disk (The Kumasi Trio 1993). Despite the uncertain origin of the song, this group of musicians was the first to record the song, and Ebo Taylor would tell me that Asare's family continued to collect royalties for performances of "Yaa Amponsah" through Essiebons Records where Taylor worked in the 1970s and 80s (Taylor 2019). In 2008 I visited the Gramophone Records Museum of Ghana in Cape Coast to meet its curator, the retired Naval

officer Kwame Sarpong. Sarpong told me that only three copies of the original record were known to survive: one in England, one that he gave to Dr. Collins[37], and one kept at the museum and which he then handed to me examine[38]. Sarpong considered the record to be the core of the collection (Sarpong 2004), and it was that conversation which set me on this path.

I posit that from these two versions on the inaugural 78, the Trio was already considering the *Amponsah* to be a Rhythm—that is to say a manipulable format. Even as early as its first recording, the template could generate two different songs. Knowing what I did anecdotally about the lyrics, dealing with issues of seduction and marriage, I was eager to know if the lyrics of the two sides of the disk were in some way in dialog with each other in some way beyond their musical conversation. I was particularly curious in that I knew from Koo Nimo that Asare often performed in the dress and character of a woman. This was stunning to me, but I was able to put it into more context. For a large part of the 20th century many Ghana musicians would perform as part of a Concert Party—a travelling revue that featured music, comedy, and theater. As I discuss in Chapter III, Akablay received much of his training in this context and Catherine Cole's monograph, *Ghana's Concert Party Theatre*, is an excellent resource for more information (2001). Suffice it to say that the actors were all men and that the theatrical performances circulated around three characters: a lady, a city

[37] Collins' Bokoor African Popular Music Archives Foundation suffered terrible losses in a 2011 flood. I do not know if this record has survived.
[38] A photo of the record from this visit is in Appendix IV.

man, and a yokel. There are elements drawn from American minstrelsy, and examples of the use of black face by African performers. While a deeper discussion of these issues is outside of the scope of this thesis, it is important to have some context for Asare's performance which continued until his death in the 1950s, though the Kumasi Trio disbanded sometime earlier.

Words

Contemporary versions of the song abound, but there has long been confusion about the original lyrics of "Yaa Amponsah." While there have been many performances of the song that deal with marriage, no two individuals I spoke with gave me the same specific narrative—a reflection of the continual re-versioning of the song. In some cases, the singer was a hopeful suitor telling Yaa to leave her husband. In other versions, the singer was married to Yaa, and one musician told me that the singer was married to Yaa but asking for a divorce in order to continue their romance as unwed lovers. No source is cited, but Stapleton and May call Asare's 1928 performance "a song about the bright lights of the city and a woman who becomes a prostitute" (Stapleton and May 1990, 35), which seems particularly off. When I played the original recording for Ghanaians, the listeners usually had a hard time understanding the singers. Twi is the most commonly spoken Ghana language today, and this original recording is in Fante[39]. Apparently the Fante of the recording is old enough to be

[39] Fante and Twi are both Akan languages and speakers of one often understand much of the other.

challenging for modern speakers. I had requested help with translations a number of times—and even native-born Fante speakers told me that they were not able to understand the lyrics. I think this resulted from a degree of arcane and idiomatic usage that contemporary speakers could not decipher. An additional factor could have been the elusive and metaphoric quality of the lyric. I have not been able to locate a published version of this lyric, and during my research no one was certain about the original words.

As support for this project, I commissioned transcriptions, translations, and interpretations of the two songs which appear in Appendix I. Both lyrics deal with marriage, and in each the husband is addressing his wife[40]. My interpreter was Andrew Mensah, and he wrote of "Amponsah - Part 1" that "the husband was describing the wife, Amponsah, as very beautiful, thus her hair was like silk twine, like white lady." I do not know for certain, but I do wonder if this ties at all to the cocoa broker's wife teaching English ballroom dancing and hosting in a European manner. I have no conclusive evidence. The lyric has some lovely imagery but does not reveal secrets. In "Amponsah - Part 2" the characters are different—the husband is much older than his wife, and he details their domestic woes.

As I investigated Ghanaians' understanding of the song, there were several who told me that they believed that the original lyrics get rather crude.

[40] Dashed is my dream that one of the songs was in Asare's drag persona, as Yaa addressing her husband.

My translator said that he saw nothing of the kind, as shown in his translation and interpretation. The source for this impression may again be the unsigned article from the 1990 *Ghana Copyright News*. It includes the following interpretation which is attributed to the musician Kwa [sic] Mensah, Kwame Asare's nephew:

> Nothing can stop my love for you
> Not even if your mum threatens to douch [sic] me with pepper or your dad with enema of boiling water
> You are so sweet
> If I were a millionaire
> I would give all my wealth to you
> Your silky hair
> Your graceful neck like the adenkum drum
> Your blackberry eyes
> Charm me most
> I cannot bear our separation (*Ghana Copyright News* 1990, 5)

The mention of silken hair is the same, but there are few overlaps with our new interpretation. The explicit punishments and the parents are absent. This could be a choice of my interpreter, but I did supply this previous interpretation as a reference, and he did not report any appearance of this text. The reason for this discrepancy is not clear. Possibly Mensah is supplying lyrics that Asare sang later in life. Mensah would probably have heard live performances more often than the Zonophone recording, and it is likely that the song's lyrics grew and changed. The aberration could also be the responsibility of someone other than Mensah, for the Ward story reported in the article (*Ghana Copyright News* 1990) does not correspond with Ward's own writing (Ward 1927) about the song, which makes me question the reliability of other elements in the article.

Conclusions

While an origin story for the song "Yaa Amponsah" seems tantalizingly close, there are elements that will likely remain unknown. In this chapter I have compiled a set of proposed origins which begin to knit together as a coherent whole, but which also diverge onto separate paths. The Kumasi Trio's 1928 performance is the *Amponsah* of record—because it *is on* record, but we know that song had been in the culture for some years. W.E. Ward's article of 1927 is evidence that it was known somewhat widely, but his research itself was not wide and based largely in the student body of his College[41]. The only travel Ward reports conducting in the colonial Gold Coast were two weeks in British Togoland—the contemporary Volta Region[42]—and this is not sourced in his *Amponsah* discussion. We are left not knowing the precise meaning of his claim that it was at the time the "best known tune in the Gold Coast."

Ward continues by saying of the song that it is "originally Fanti," and that "it has spread all over the country, being translated into various languages in the process" (Ward 1927, 205). This confirms and complicates what we know. Akablay, Collins, and the story attributed to Ward in the *Copyright News* each place the location of the song's origin north of Accra in the Eastern Region, away from coastal Fante people. However, Ward confirms our belief that the song originates in Fante which places the song back in the hands of the Kumasi Trio

[41] The student body at this time would probably be a narrow sample economically, ethnically, and regionally.
[42] Ghana is organized into administrative *regions* akin to states in the US.

musicians who were Fantes from the Saltpond-Cape Coast area. Both Koo and Akablay have explanations for why the musicians had travelled out from Fanteland. However, it is unclear that they would have composed this song in Fante if their audience in Apedwa—and Yaa Amponsah herself—were not Fante.

Ward's comment that there were lyrical iterations in multiple languages[43] as early as 1927 reveals how early the versioning of *Amponsah* begins, and perhaps helps contextualize the uncertainty about the original lyric which I document in this chapter. It is difficult for us to assume anything, but I posit that the song originated on the coast, developed fluidly, and was concretized in the studio—albeit briefly—by Asare's remarkable guitar playing, lyrical customizations, and personal arrangement. That 78rpm disk is a snapshot of folk music evolution in process. Further, all of these unknowns characterize the space that the song fills in the Ghanaian imagination—shared impressions, many legends, and personal to all.

[43] I would like to know more about his comment: to which languages he refers, and from where this information was sourced. I'm guessing Ga and Twi, and nothing further afield, but Ward includes no detail beyond the initial statement.

Chapter III: Paths of Transmission

The sun sets early in Accra. The moonless night is dark as I returned to the Alegria Guest House in the Lapaz district around 9pm. The young men who look after the rooms were already asleep on the floor of the large reception area, stretched out on the cushions from the couches while the television played music videos. I paused on the way to my room—the song playing was a blazing *Amponsah* by J. A. Adofo entitled "Kwame Ankra Yie"[44]. I got out my phone to record, amused at how the Rhythm continued to follow me everywhere. The next video was Agya Koo's "Magya Ɔdɔ Wo Abibrem"[45]—another *Amponsah*! And then the power went out.

Guides

Once you listen for it, the Rhythm is everywhere: bubbling out of clubs, in videos playing on TV, in lullabies, in Churches, in the rhythms tapped out by tradesmen on the streets of Accra. In this chapter, I discuss some of the modes of transmission of Rhythms for Ghana musicians and how they have changed across generations. This is a big topic, and here I only touch upon-what could be a much longer study. I focus upon the musicians that I interviewed and consider the relationships and sites where they learned their music, and how they

[44] This same video has over half a million views on YouTube as of May 2020.
[45] Note: Agya Koo is the stage name of this actor/comedian/musician. The Twi word "agya" in an honorific meaning father and implying an elder. Koo Nimo is addressed as Agya Koo by younger musicians such as me.

themselves propel the Rhythm in the contemporary culture. Koo Nimo, Ebo Taylor, and Akablay learned as apprentices to older musicians. For younger musicians like Bright Osei, Ekow Paintsil, and Asah Nkanseh, music education occurred in the Church. The Christian church is central for Smart Nkansah and George Spratz as well, and for many Ghanaians, religious practice becomes the site of cultural preservation for the palmwine and highlife Rhythms.

Both Smart Nkansah and Koo Nimo emphasized the importance of recorded music in the development of their musical knowledge. It would clearly be wrong to infer that recorded music stopped being important, however these two elders were more vocal about the impact of recorded sound than any of the younger musicians. Both of them referred to the era of the pre-electric gramophone and the 78rpm disk, and I think both the freshness of the recorded medium and the relatively small amount of recorded music heard in their formative years made a deeper emotional impression than would the crush of the unending broadcast on the street today.

Smart marks his origin as a musician to recordings, remembering the time when he was a boy playing records for his father each night after work. It was here that all of the Rhythms entered him:

> My father was a music lover. Any song that is released, my father would buy. And being the youngest boy, I would be like the machine: "Play it." He would arrange the records as—what they call vinyl. Yeah, and just align it. He said that from this one, you play this one, you play this one. (S. Nkansah 2019)

When he would begin studying guitar, he had all of this information inside him already, and his job became to recreate the music he already had internalized:

> So I started when man taught to me the basic ones of that Rhythm—then I started playing it! If I made a mistake, my mind—or my brain, because I'd been playing the records so many times for my father—my, my, my brain had been recorded—my memory! The memory will tell you, "No, no, this is not the correct note!"

Like Smart, Koo Nimo has fond memories of hearing that first generation of records and he also learned from one-on-one encounters with the older generation guitarists. Koo was sent to Cape Coast to attend Adisadel College (high school level institution) from 1949 to 1952, and he would sneak away to listen to a man play in town. This man was the brother of Kwaa Mensah, and therefore also a nephew of Kwame Asare/Jacob Sam. When I asked the guitarist's name, Koo did not know: "I just didn't worry to ask."

> He was a carpenter in the University. And after lessons in the afternoon I'd just slink in to see this old man. And I must confess, he played *better* than Kwaa Mensah! Phenomenal guitarist… But he made a real impression on me. (Nimo 2019)

Koo also recounted hearing the Kumasi Trio play as a boy. Though he was too young to go inside the club, he and his friends gathered outside to hear that famous group. Kwame Asare of the Kumasi Trio would have again been living in Cape Coast at the time Koo was there. The guitarist Ebo Taylor told me of his own encounter with Asare.

> I met Kwame Asare during my grandfather's funeral. I was 14 then. In Cape Coast. And he was a tall man. Very tall, and he

> played the guitar high next to himself [holds guitar neck up by his head][46]... And he alone performed that night at the funeral. And he performed a number of songs, from the folklore. From the folklore. All of them, his own songs. This is in the Fifties. (Taylor 2019)

I noted that when Taylor spoke of Asare's songs, he says they are "from the folklore" which prompted me to ask for clarification. Taylor indicated that he meant that Asare's famous songs—being foundational for Ghanaians—are considered folklore. But also, Asare's compositions are drawn from a communal palmwine tradition where specific Rhythms are authorless and of the "folk tradition", but then are authored by artists who make distinctive versions. I know of no one alive today who studied directly with Asare or the Trio members—so that point of transmission is absent. However, Kwaa Mensah did learn to play "Yaa Amponsah" from Asare and John Collins made a recording of this Sam style *Amponsah* which I present in Chapter IV. That relationship of Mensah as teacher and Collins as student (and now teacher) was a critical route of one-to-one transmission from the earliest generation of the song, and one continued by Koo Nimo who has trained many guitarists to play in his own style: George Spratz, Kyekyeku, George Darko, and Paa Joe, to name a few.

Anthony Akablay came of age in the early 1980s and he too learned from elder musicians. Akablay is an Nzema from the village of Anokyi in the far west of Ghana next to the Côte d'Ivoire border. He made his first guitar himself,

[46] You can see this posture in the best known—and perhaps only—photograph of the Kumasi Trio.

using a tin of his mother's Saturday Night Powder for its body, much as George Spratz made his own first guitar from a Milo tin.[47] Aka jumped to professional music directly from secondary school. His first lessons on guitar had been from Paa Joe, but his education in the palmwine Rhythms came from a man he called Uncle Attah[48]. Akablay had been hired to perform as part of F. Micah's Guitar Band and the group did Concert Party[49] performances as discussed in Chapter II. "So that's when I got to know this song. And then this Uncle Attah was doing the guitar, playing music for the theater background. He plays it. And he told me all these stories."

Akablay's big break came when he got tapped to replace Paa Joe in the top band of that time—Jewel Ackah's Butterfly Six. It was in this band that he met a young Asamoah Rambo, my friend in Chicago. Aka recounts his first gig with the group, and his terrific failure when playing the song "Agogi"—a complicated *Amponsah* written by Paa Joe.

> We were playing at Talk-of-the-Town in Tema. Sunday afternoon. The weather was cool. The place was packed! And jammed! And Jewel had this song, [singing] "Jesus for which…" he would sing,

[47] Milo is a cocoa powder with added vitamins manufactured by Nestle and sold in Africa and South Asia. It is mixed with water or milk. Spratz explains: "I studied it and created my own. Instead of their body, I used a Milo tin. A can, yes. Then I used a wood, and my tuning pegs were nails, and the strings... what I used for my strings were the shoemaker's thread. In Ghana we have some hard thread for the shoemakers. And then that was what I used as my strings. Disadvantage or demerit, I used to buy strings every--I didn't even have money to buy those strings. They disadvantaged but I could say I learned guitar on THAT own-made guitar." (Spratz 2019)

[48] Note that Uncle Attah is also the source of Akablay's origin story in Chapter II.

[49] There was a much older man who performed as a comedian in this group. This man had a signature song he would perform, "We are going to take the girls away…" which Aka refashioned as "Take Away" in 2016 and it became the biggest hit of Aka's career.

> and then "A-a-men." Then he count to the guitarist, "a 1, a 2, a 3, a 4—it's Amponsah! Yeah. Paa Joe invented that one. Then the drummer will roll, then the whole band will jam. And then Jewel turned to me and said, "a 1, a 2, a 3, a 4…" I started and my plectrum failed. I was shivering. I was shivering! And Jewel stopped the band, he said, "Look! Look at this boy... if you fail, I will slap you!" [laughter] Back then I wasn't a mature player, so, I mean, it was a big blow to me. So the following morning, I pack my bag. I wanted to come back to Takoradi. It was hard. I went to sit in the bus. Meanwhile this vocalist in the band went to tell Jewel Ackah. "Jewel! Akablay is running away!"

While the youthful Akablay had failed *Amponsah* on stage that day, Ackah would not let him run, pulling him off the bus, and calling all the musicians together to prepare Akablay for the next concert.

Aka learned the palmwine Rhythms from Paa Joe and Uncle Attah first, and then from Jewel and his bandsmen, and in turn these were passed on to me. Aka's method—learned from his elders—has gaps unique to his experiences. He has little knowledge of *Mainline* or *Fireman*, but likewise each of the other players I spoke to has their own specific knowledge of the Rhythms in the forms that they were taught. Aka continues to share his method and has always thought of teaching as part of his musical life. In the 1990s he began writing a method book of Ghanaian-style guitar[50] which he has long hoped to publish. He hosts a WhatsApp group for Ghanaian guitar students where he answers questions and posts videos, and he is currently producing high-quality instructional videos which he hopes to launch online.

[50] Aka lost this when moving to a new home sometime in the 2010s, but I had made a photocopy in 2008. An excerpt is included in Chapter IV.

A similar commitment to teaching and mentorship is seen in the contemporary group Women of Colour. The group is led by Della Hayes[51], a singer of the same generation as Aka. The core project of this group is the cultivation of artistic skill and financial independence for young women in the Ghana music industry, and many have passed through the band as they have matured from adolescence into adulthood. Della finds and recruits the girls and stages many of her performances in orphanages and schools. She teaches the girls instrumental technique and the specific repertoire of the ensemble, and as importantly she provides meals and a second home for the young women. When I asked Della about *Amponsah,* she stated that it was ubiquitous. Della is an Ewe and said that the song could easily be seen in the lullaby called "Toboli." She proceeded to give me a lesson similar to one she would give to her young musicians. We clapped the 12/8 rhythm Agbadza bell timeline of the Ewe, then she had me sing an *Amponsah* accompaniment while she placed the vocal for "Toboli" on top:

Nye gutɔ nye dzedzevinye lo -Toboli
'meka efui nam o – Toboli
'meka edzui namo – Toboli
meka fa avile zamé nam o
meka fa avi le zamé nam o
dzedze vinyl ee - Toboli[52]

[51] Smart Nkansah told me that he discovered Della Hayes and hired her for her first singing position.

[52] Della Hayes wrote out the Ewe lyric for me during our interview. She offered an interpretation rather than a line for line translation. In the song a mother is saying "Don't cry for me," and Della swayed as if she was rocking a crying infant. She further says, "Don't cry in the night for me, and if you cry in the night the night will come and catch you away." Her usage of "for me" here is

The Right Path

> Akablay: Yeah. In the Nineties it stopped because nightlife got dead in Ghana.
> NB: What happened?
> Akablay: Ah, because of the coup. 1979 coup. And then the leaders brought curfew. Everyone had to sleep by 6pm. And these theaters, they do it in the night. So, you sleep from 6pm to 6am and everything. '81… During that time most of the musicians—good, good musicians—left Ghana.

A number of musicians of different generations talked about the Rawlings coup—which in fact were a pair of coups in 1979 and 1981. Rawlings remained president until 2001, and as I mentioned in Chapter I, many musicians benefited from his favor. However, musicians also suffered and it was in this time that many musicians, including Paa Joe, emigrated. Note that Aka's gig with Jewel Ackah replacing Paa Joe was on a Sunday afternoon—no nighttime concerts for the musicians at this time.

I had a conversation with a much younger musician, the bassist Bright Osei who experienced the coup and its impact upon music as a child. I have known Bright since gigging with him and Akablay in 2013. We reconnected at his standing Tuesday gig at Club +233[53]. He was interested in music from a young age, and while highlife music had been a part of the primary school's music

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different than an American's, for she doesn't mean "don't be sad about me", but rather "don't cry while I am taking care of you." She says that many words, including "Toboli," have no literal meaning but are sounds used to make a melody that will soothe the child (Hayes 2019).

[53] Club +233 in Accra specializes in a contemporary jazz and caters to a diverse but affluent audience.

curriculum under President Kwame Nkrumah, much of the cultural programming had disappeared from the schools by the time Bright was a student in the 1990s.

> And the parents don't buy instruments for kids in Ghana… When I was growing, a lot of parents didn't want their kids to play music. Back then the musicians weren't doing well—musicians weren't respected… After the coup—that's when I was born—the coup affected all the musicians, the curfew and all that. All the musicians left the scene and so music wasn't that good. Nobody wanted his children to do music. (Osei 2019)

There was one venue, however, where people could continue to study music, and that was in church. This is where Bright studied, and he is still part of the worship band at his family's Assemblies of God congregation. Importantly, churches own instruments. In the 1960s and 70s a band owner, like Dr. K Gyasi in Kumasi or the Western Diamonds' Ebo Coker in Takoradi, would not be a musician but would own the group's instruments and recordings. That role has, in part, been taken over by churches. Bright continues:

> The only place where you can have instruments to practice when you are young is to go to church… So we were starved, but they allowed us to do music because it would keep us in church. You know, so that we have good moral backgrounds, we stay in church, we are brought up like Christians, and all that… You know where they [your children] are.

Importantly it is here, in the church, that many younger musicians are learning to play the highlife Rhythms. I spoke with Ekow Paintsil, the musical director of the Emmanuel Methodist Church, located in the Tabora/Alhadji/New Market district which rises through a dense network of small roads from the main junction on the Lapaz Road. When I first came in 2008, the main road was

a single paved lane in each direction, with a wide improvised frontage section on either side. Now the Lapaz Road boasts eight paved lanes in some places and a partially paved frontage, but the quadrupling of the main traffic artery has barely changed the amount of congestion—demand has grown to meet the increased capacity. Akablay and his family have belonged to Emmanuel Methodist church since moving to Accra and I have visited there many times over the years. Aka often plays in the band, and his sons Anthony and Kenneth are learning to play bass and drum set as members of the church band.

Paintsil himself was taught by the bass player at his family's church in Takoradi, and now he manages the musicians of the Lapaz congregation for all its services. I asked him to describe the church's repertoire. "In our church, we play different kinds of genre, and by that I mean we do reggae, we do highlife, we do soca, we do country music, sometimes we play jazz with our hymns. And we have a traditional one called Agbadza" (Paintsil 2019). He had told me that *Amponsah* is the "bed of highlife" and I asked him to describe why they use the uniquely Ghanaian highlife during a service instead of another style. "The Praises is hot highlife, because we need people to dance and glorify God with whatever is in them. So that time you don't need to play that cool music—you go hot. And it's Highlife, pure. When we are doing Offering, we do Highlife."

There are many modern gospel songs that are *Amponsahs*, and the Emmanuel Church band play many of them including, "Stand Up for Jesus" and "Se Woama Mebre." "Yaa Amponsah" has been morally recontextualized for

decades. The composer Ephraim Amu is credited with an early lyrical revision for school children that changes the text completely:

> Half-past Four is a good time
> To go home and play
> Too much learning is boring
> Hence, we all want some time to play (*Ghana Copyright News* 1990, 5)

While the lyrical contents were changed from the version recorded by the Kumasi Trio, this revision fits within our narrative of constant variation and development. While the work of the lyrics is now different, the work of the music is not, and its power of communal identity is simply being redirected to carry new messages. The imbedded indigeneity of the Rhythm can become a vehicle for a changing set of the community's spiritual and education lessons.

Smart Nkansah also learned music through the church. While his brain had inscribed onto his memory the Ghana Rhythms heard on his father's records at 8 years old, he would not play guitar for many years. His father died when he was still quite young, and the family moved back to his mother's village. "I was there in Begoro… One night I saw a church, having a service. And when I went, I saw women playing saxophone! And I said, wow! After this, I will go and learn! So, I *went* to the church to go and learn."

Smart was about 15 years old at this time, and took lessons with the Church's guitarist who taught him all of the palmwine and highlife musics that were being used for the religious songs—many of which Smart recognized from

his father's records. However, the man teaching him grew frustrated when the Church delayed in paying him his monthly stipend.

> So he left, and went to the village. So anytime we go to church, the guitar is there. So I started to play the guitar. But someone went to the village and told him, "Look, the boy you are teaching is now playing guitar." So he came! And I was playing the guitar, so he just grabbed the guitar like this! So the next time I went for a lesson, he said, "Ah, no..." Because he left for them to know that he's important. And they will call him and pay him. But once I'm playing, they won't.

In the older guitarist's response, we see that his knowledge of the Ghana Rhythms was valued in the church[54]—even if they weren't paying him on time—and that this traditional guitar music could be found at the center of the congregation's services. Smart took this knowledge of traditional Rhythms and techniques back to the secular world when he joined highlife groups The Youngsters and Yamoah's band, and continued to build upon them when starting his own group, Sweet Talks, in Tema. Sweet Talks first hit in 1975 was "Adam and Eve"—an *Amponsah* in C. The group was voted the best in Ghana twice before Smart moved on to other projects.

Asah Nkansah[55] is a musician younger than Smart, but for him the church was also central to his musical training and his affiliation remains central to his identity. Asah leads a quartet of palmwine revivalists called Kwan Pa (Twi for "the right path"). They have held down a prized weekly gig at Zen Garden in the

[54] This is the "Traditional Knowledge" intellectual property mentioned by Nana Asante of the National Folklore Board and discussed in Chapter V (Asante 2019).
[55] Asah and Smart have the same surname, but there is no known familial connection.

upscale Labone district of Accra for more than a year and their mid-week concerts attract large crowds of young professionals who delight in the band's repertoire of traditional palmwine and Ga folk songs. Asah plays guitar and sings lead, actively engaging with the audience. The three other members play the percussion: the large, box shaped bass drum of the Ga people called gome, kpanlogo drums, axatse, dawuro, and frikyiwa. All join together in tight unison on the chorus sections. I met with Asah in the Korle Bu neighborhood at the band's headquarters near to the Presbyterian church where the four musicians met in the worship band. They continue to play the church's repertoire of hymns and highlife for services, but for Kwan Pa gigs the music is all folkloric classics.

Like Smart, he started his musical training at church. His first exposure to more traditional sounds came when seeing Koo Nimo perform on television, and he is now deeply devoted to preserving Koo's style. When he attended university at KNUST[56], he joined the House of Praise Choir—a student organization. The group had no guitarist, and he endeavored to teach himself to play for the group. The group was singing contemporary Ghanaian gospel. He demonstrated this style for me by playing "Muntintim (Our Christ Will Come)." The song is from 2006 and written by the well-known gospel composer Kofi

[56] Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. Koo Nimo was faculty here and still maintains an office on campus.

Owusu Dua Anto (known as KODA). Of course it is an *Amponsah* and in C (A. Nkansah 2019).

Amponsah carries important cultural meaning for the Ghanaians, which is why the Rhythm has been used to carry so many lyrical messages in and out of the church. I spoke with George Spratz (Ankoma Mensah)[57] in Kumasi. Like Asah Nkansah, he first fell in love with guitar when seeing Koo Nimo performing with his group, Addadam Agofomma, on Ghana Television. "I was young, but the song I recalled was 'Buy When Death Sell'!"—this is Koo Nimo's signature song, an *Ɔdɔ Nsan*. George became a talented young guitarist, and eventually joined that group as Koo Nimo's principal accompanist (Spratz 2019).

Some years before our 2019 conversation, however, George had left Koo's group[58] to become a pastor at the Gentle Ministry and Prayer Camp—a

[57] Spratz gave me the following explanation for his assumed name, and I believe it is illustrative of his character and personal journey. "When I started to learn guitar, I read a book from one writer, Morris Chapman— 'Important Keys to Success'. And then somewhere in the book I came across a particular statement, [emphasizing with fist on table] *positive mental thinking*. Positive mental attitude. So, somewhere in the book he stated that anything that the mind of man can think of, if put into practice he can attain it. So, the formula he used was 'positive mental attitude'—PMA [fist on table with each word]. So, if he use that formula—PMA—then if I wanted to become a legendary guitarist I needed a formula, too. I devised a formula: George SPRATZ. SPRATZ: if i want to be a guitarist, then I have to be serious, for the S. I have to be practicing, for the P. I have to be romantic. I have to appreciate other players! And then I want to transcend, that's to go beyond human's imagination. Then the 'zeal' should be there. So that's how come I use, I borrow that name. It looks like a German name! SPRATZ!"

[58] Spratz's departure left a big hole in the music as Koo has had a long string of exceptional second guitarists in his group. Shortly before I arrived in Ghana to conduct this research, Akablay had begun playing with Koo—a relationship that I brokered! Aka was always frightened to be in touch with Papa after having received a scolding for the music of Western Diamonds when he was young. Koo had always asked me why Aka would not come to him. Now they are playing together at all of Koo's concerts.

Charismatic Christian[59] church. I asked him how he had come to this decision. In vivid detail, he laid out a vision he had while praying at church in which he was visited by Christ: "The heavens opened wide, and we saw a bright light, like more than 10,000 times brighter than the sun. That's what we saw. And then, we saw someone walked from within covered with a plait of clouds." Christ took him and the other worshippers for a tour of the beauties of heaven, and the sufferings of *Asamanodo*, or "Hades." In Hell he saw many people he had known in life, specifically a club owner where George had played, and who now suffered great torments which he described to me in terrific detail. He continued, "I had now to decide for myself whether I'd still want to play and then for people to drink and smoke and then go to hell, or to decide to play for some other, for the greater good one day."

George is very active in music still, and he posts many videos on YouTube. Many are religious and others are pedagogical—some about palmwine music and some specifically about *Amponsah* methodology. He still has great affection for Koo, and like so many Ghana musicians, he seems like a father to him in more than musical ways. George played me one of his songs which was a classic *Amponsah* in C. He sang in English, and it is strikingly autobiographical:

[59] Of the Ghanaian denominations, the Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Methodists are considered "orthodox," and European in origin. The Charismatic churches are "owned" by their pastors, making them both more independent and more African, but also making them more susceptible to a mishandling of funds as the church's monies pass to the pastor, and then from the pastor to his children. The "prosperity gospel," megachurches, and large revivals have grown enormously in popularity over the last several years.

I want to play some licks to this / The original Rhythm we call 'Yaa Amponsah.'
I have played it before / back in my secular days
And there was plenty people who drink / and smoke to it.
I've played along the length/and breadth of the world
But I was still the same [vocalizes Rhythm]
I began to see / a lot of changes
The moment I started / playing in church.
So I'll play my "Yaa Amponsah" / In the house of the Lord
[vocalizes Rhythm]
I will play my "Yaa Amponsah" / to the glory of the Lord

Closing

In this chapter I illustrate the ways in which different generations of musicians learned this music, its meaning within their culture, and the technical and conceptual ability to perform it. In some cases, their education came from personal exchange from a teacher, for others the music appeared inscribed on disk, and for still others the traditional music arrived to them embedded within the religious practice of the Christian church. For the older musicians, this process was modelled on conventional apprenticeships. The younger musicians found the music as an integral part of church worship, a change that some attribute to the second Rawlings coup and to the curfew that followed. Though the music was being used to support religious lyrics, the understanding of the music's national heritage and history gave the highlife Rhythms meaning for these younger musicians. The traditional Rhythms are taken into and also out of the Christian church. For Bright Osei, this education in folkloric indigenous music means everything to his identity, even as he plays modern, global styles. "It means a lot to me. Yeah, because it has shaped my whole music composure.

Yeah, yeah. At my age, I don't sound my age. Like even my compositions, you know it's quite different. I'm more rooted in the original Ghanaian style."

Chapter IV: Musical Analysis of Amponsah: the Iconic, the Interpretive

Out of One, Many

In my opening pages, I mention my first interactions with "Yaa Amponsah," and my confusion, as an outsider, about what this music was—a song, or a form, or perhaps something else. In my personal story, Uncle Joe told me I played it well, but it was not a song in our set list. Asamoah confirmed that it was a song, and when I went sleuthing to find a recording, I only turned up Koo Nimo's acoustic performance on the *Vintage Palmwine* cd and a "guitar band" style performance by Roadmaster & Agyemang. As I learned of *Amponsah*'s conversion to a standardized "Rhythm," I also learned to search for it under different names. The interpretations, applications, variations, and innovations by Ghanaian musicians were countless and diverse. Begun by the palmwine guitarists, modernized by the highlife dance bands, reharmonized by King Onyina, lyrically domesticated by the morally upright, electronified by the Bergher Highlife musicians living in Europe in the 1980s, and digitized by the Hiplife[60] musicians in the 2000s and Afrobeats artists today in the early 2020s—the development is dizzying.

The central question then becomes an issue of identification—if there are so many acceptable variations, if there is so much difference in interpretation

[60] "Hiplife" is the Ghanaian hip hop style: a hip hop/highlife portmanteau. Ofori Amponsah's "Bonwire" is an *Amponsah*.

and application, if in fact variation and change are essential to the aesthetic, then how can we identify and/or define *Amponsah*? This is a question I put to all of my interviewees—how do we know *Amponsah* when we hear it?

I had constructed a playlist of performances that I considered to be *Amponsah*s played by musicians from Ghana and other countries and I played bits of these tracks for Ghana musicians in the attempt to establish two things: (1) to get an emic understanding of what components are essential to *Amponsah* for Ghanaians, and (2) to establish an etic and objective understanding that can be used to assess appearances of the Rhythm in the music of other countries, as discussed in Chapter V.

An extended list of *Amponsah* and *Amponsah*-adjacent performances from Ghana and other countries is available as an appendix to this paper, but the tracks that I most frequently played include the Kumasi Trio's "Amponsah - Part 1" and "Amponsah - Part 2," the 1930s track "Abonsa" by the Nigerian group Jolly Orchestra, Nigerian highlife bandleader Rex Lawson's "Tamuno Bo Iboro Ma," Congolese guitarist Docteur Nico's "Afrique de l'Ouest," Koo Nimo's "Amponsah Unlimited," the Guinéen Orchestre Bembeya Jazz's "Mami Wata," Kwaa Mensah's "Mami Wata," Paul Simon's "Spirit Voices," Nigerian Sir Victor Uwaifo's "Joromi," Hugh Masekela's "Mami Wata," Trinidad calypsonian Lord Kitchener's "Mamie Water," and Boubacar Traoré's "Minuit." Akablay keenly agreed that all were Amponsah and sang along with each of them instantly, laughing. "You can't run away from it! The melody will always appear!"(Akablay

2019a). While he didn't know the all these versions, he absolutely knew and could sing the Nigerian versions in Yoruba and English, respectively.

My hope had been to identify the musical components that define an *Amponsah* within the repertoire of palmwine and contemporary Ghanaian song. As we have seen already, the lyric and lyrical themes are not necessarily preserved from the earliest iteration in any but a handful of versions. In this chapter, I identify the core musical components which I have derived from my interviews, transcriptions, and analysis of multiple performances recorded during my fieldwork and heard in idiomatic recordings. These components can be categorized as melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic, however many signature motifs of an *Amponsah* straddle these three categories, for the melody manifests within a signature rhythm and simultaneously expresses the harmony and harmonic rhythm of the song template. Having established our expected materials in this chapter, I then present unexpected variations of *Amponsah* in Chapter V. Unless otherwise indicated, all transcriptions are presented in the key of C Major. If the original performance key is different, I note it. However, the key of C—as discussed below—is the most common key for *Amponsah* performance.

Koo Nimo's Iconic Theme

Koo Nimo emphatically declares that there is one motif that must be present for Amponsah to be manifest. It is notable that the motif is not material from the vocal but from the guitar accompaniment, and hence that the guitar, not the human voice, is the defining expression of *Amponsah*. Koo describes this two-part call-and-response melody: "I do first [plays D E F]—fifty percent. Second part: [plays E D E C]—this is Amponsah! You could do: [plays both] and you're done!" (Nimo 2019). I refer to this as the Koo Nimo's "Iconic Theme," and it is as follows:

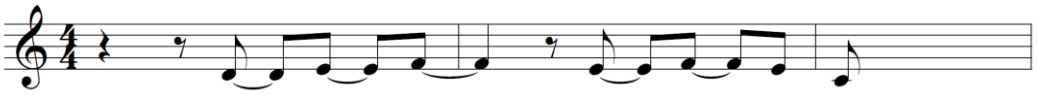


Figure 4.1: Koo Nimo's Iconic Theme.

Notably this theme expresses characteristics of the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic principles discussed in the subsections below while maintaining independence as its own theme. Koo Nimo insists on this theme's preeminence, and so his acolytes George Spratz and Samuel Asare do as well. Other players like Akablay do not emphasize this theme specifically by showing it in isolation from the complete guitar part, but it is expressed in their playing.

To the newcomer, the theme can be deceiving upon first listen and when heard in isolation it tends to anchor itself upon the strong pulse instead of the syncopated upbeat. My ear placed this first D on beat 3, so that the second melodic phrase resolves to an E on the downbeat of a new measure. This

however raises the issue of barline placement within the eight beat/two measure cycle, a topic continued below in the *Harmonic Rhythm* section. I would wager that to many non-Ghanaians the theme sounds as follows:

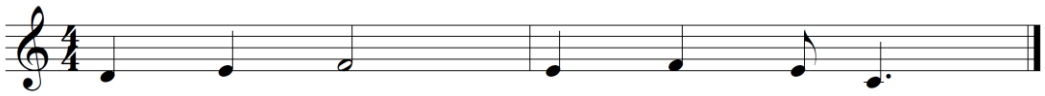


Figure 4.2: Koo Nimo's Iconic Theme, misheard.

I believe that this misinterpretation is reinforced by the syncopation of the ending "C." To the musician experienced with African music, a syncopation is expected, but the correct timing of this theme is that shown in Figure 4.1 and is further discussed in the *Rhythm* subsection below. In his otherwise excellent African guitar method book, Banning Eyre transcribes this theme as in Figure 4.2 (Eyre 2002, 6). Banning confirmed that he learned the theme from Koo Nimo in much the way I did, and we had a good laugh about the difficulty of learning African guitar styles. This misplacement of the rhythm within the timeline can lead to problems in feel and phrasing when expanded to Koo's full guitar arrangement or when playing with Ghanaians. Koo Nimo's Iconic Three Note theme is the cobbler's rhythm, so easily mis-heard. Likewise I would argue that based upon this principle, the transcription of George Williams Aingo's "Na Mapu Nu Kyew" in the *Garland Handbook of African Music* section on palmwine is also rhythmically misplaced by one eighth-note, and shifts the up-up-up onto the strong beats 3, 4, and 1—a quick listen to Aingo will confirm the error (Andrew L. Kaye 2008, 93).

Once a student understands the Iconic Theme, Koo Nimo begins to demonstrate his signature elaborations, the first of which is as follows:

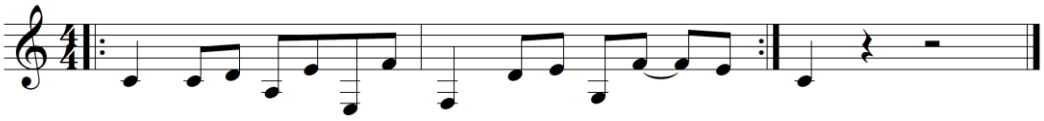


Figure 4.3: Koo Nimo's Iconic Theme, elaborated (Nimo 2013).

In this much denser passage, the "iconic theme" seen is 4.1 is fully present and in its correct position in the timeline. Some expanded harmony appears, as well as the anticipatory theme discussed in *Melody* and *Harmony*, where a chord or harmonic change appears on the pickup to a strong beat, before the downbeat of the measure. Note how the octave pairs in the first measure and the major third (E) of the tonic (C) in the last upbeat of the second measure express the harmony in this anticipatory manner.

Next, I consider the three categories of music more generally, and how Koo Nimo's themes adhere to *Amponsah*'s principles as well as how others define the composition.

I: Melody

While not always present in versions of *Amponsah*, the "Yaa Amponsah" melody often appears in related variations in vocals, guitar playing, on horns, and on keyboards in more modern performances. In all cases the melody is constructed of two halves—a call and a response—played either by a single guitarist or singer, or split between a soloist and chorus, be it vocal or instrumental.

The opening motif or call (which I will refer to as "Melody A") sits in the first measure, and the response (or "Melody B") fills the second. In the foundational harmony of the song, the first measure is all tonic, C Major or C^7, and the second measure is shared between the subdominant F^6 and dominant G^7 chords. Below follows a typical version of the vocal chorus with the lyric. This version is transcribed from an interview with Anthony Akablay, but it is exemplary:

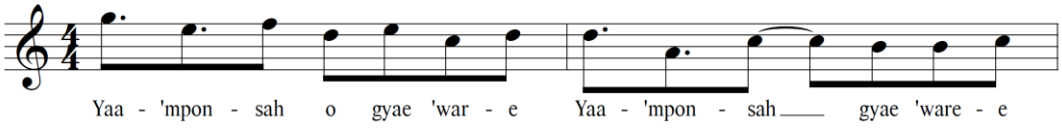


Figure 4.4: Basic sung melodic theme (2019).

This melody and its variants are distinguished by a descent in thirds (G-E, F-D, E-C) predominantly in Melody A as here, but present in Melody B in variations such as Figure 4.7. The response, Melody B, descends from an F or F^6 harmony to the Major third of dominant V^7 (the pitch B of a G^7 chord) before resolving up to the tonic pitch C. This resolution to the tonic occurs on the anticipatory last upbeat of the second measure—a very important hallmark of the *Amponsah* Rhythm, and one which we saw in Koo Nimo's theme and will continue to see in every example that follows.

When the melody is in the hands of Ghanaian guitarists, they most often harmonize it in sixths—or more specifically in inverted thirds—which fall comfortably under the plucking hand which strikes with thumb and index finger on non-adjacent strings, i.e. strings 1 and 3 or 2 and 4. Fingerstyle guitarists

favor this inversion to a voicing in thirds because the spacing of thirds on adjacent strings is uncomfortable or un-intuitive. Thirds are more frequently used by players using a plectrum (not introduced until the mid-20th century) or are played by the index finger in a brushing movement across two strings. Three-finger technique (thumb, index, with middle) was uncommon before the modern era. In the Kumasi Trio's recording of "Amponsah - Part 1," Kwame Asare (Jacob Sam) begins by playing the melody as follows:

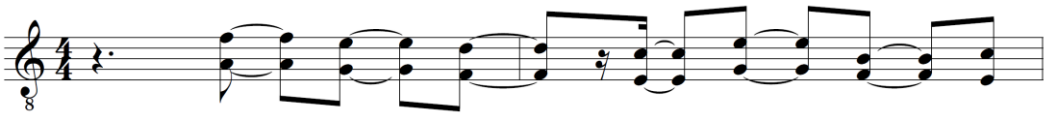


Fig 4.5: Guitar Melody from Kumasi Trio "Amponsah - Part 1" (1928).

Asare's part is more streamlined than the later idiomatic melodic line seen in 4.4, but note that this earliest performance cooks along at a brisk 140 bpm, and accelerates to 153 bpm within its three minutes of the 78rpm side[61]—and a faster subdivision would be unlikely. The descending thirds are absent (though present in Asare's vocal elaborations), but the essential melodic contour is intact. Note the harmonic resolution to the tonic in the second half of beat 4, measure 2 as expected. Also, the rhythm is the same as Koo Nimo's iconic theme, and Asare is using either the same pitches or harmonic substitutions.

Most all *Amponsah*-style songs that follow this initial recording are mid-tempo, averaging around 110 to 115 bpm. Though there are both faster and

[61] There is no change in pitch which would have supported a theory that a mechanical error gradually slowed at the time of recording or sped up at the time of playback. I argue that this is not the case—the band simply speeds up.

slower versions (Victor Uwaifo's famous "Jaromi" is at 80 bpm), this moderate speed has become an expected part of the aesthetic, and perhaps better suits the experimentation and sophisticated harmonic and rhythmic play that accompanies the song. The most typical form of the guitar melody in contemporary practice is like the following, as taught to me by Akablay in 2008:

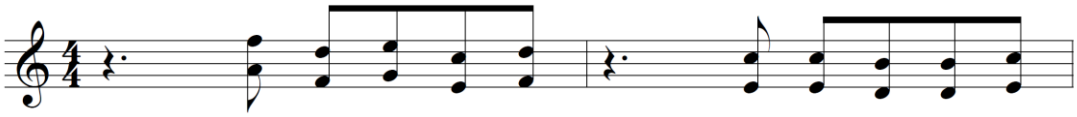


Figure 4.6: Idiomatic theme guitar melody (Akablay, 2008).

In this iteration, the guitarist has time to play eighth notes and fills in around the essential melody as played by Asare. As with the Kumasi Trio in 4.5, the melody begins midway through the first measure and descends through cascading thirds to an F^6 harmony, anticipating the downbeat of measure 2. Note that the syncopation of both the Kumasi Trio's intro and of Koo Nimo's theme are represented. Performances of the song often begin with this two-measure passage—or a version of it—acting in some sense as a call for the response of rest of the song. There often follows a further elaboration that fills the whole phrase as seen below:

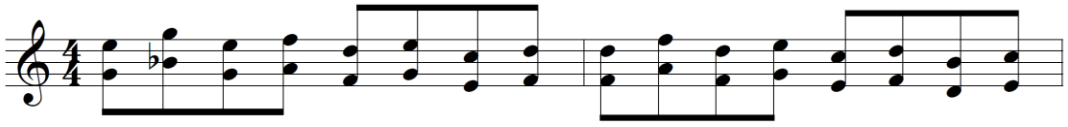


Figure 4.7: Guitar melody, developed (Akablay 2008).

This theme is notable for introducing the flatted 7 into the C chord and is the iteration used to begin the performance on *The Old Highlife* by Roadmaster

and Agyemang.[62] We can hear both themes at the beginning of the Koo Nimo performance from the *Vintage Palmwine* cd[63] recorded by John Collins, which is one of Koo's favorite performances. Koo refers to the type of open-ended, instrumental performance on this track as "Amponsah Unlimited!"[64], and revels in the introduction of new themes and personal expression. In the transcription below[65] I have transposed from the capo key of D to the positional key of C to more easily demonstrate melodic and harmonic commonalities between transcriptions. More discussion of the capo follows, but suffice it to say that the guitarists are playing as if in the key of C here, even if the recording is in D.

[62] Roadmaster and Agyemang. *The Old Highlife*. 2001.
[63] Various Artists. *Vintage Palmwine*. 2005.
[64] The exclamation point is mine, but anyone who has heard Koo discuss the song knows that it is the appropriate punctuation.
[65] This transcription is of the performance I referenced in Chapter I—the one I was unable to decode in 2007.

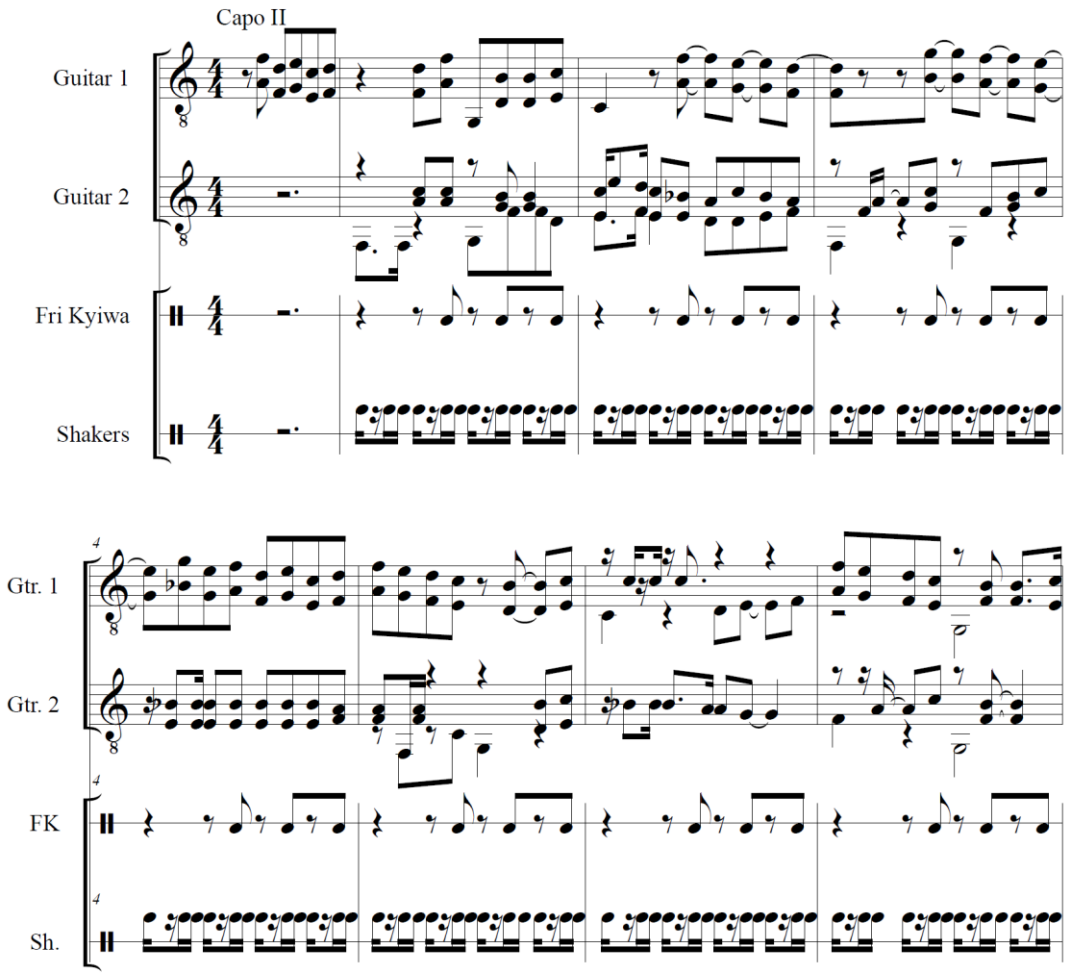


Figure 4.8: "Yaa Amponsah" by Koo Nimo (2003).

II: Rhythm

The rhythms of Yaa Amponsah can be defined as those of the accompaniment instruments, and those in the main melodic themes—though the two frequently overlap. Most commonly Yaa Amponsah is performed in a 4/4 meter. 12/8 iterations are possible though uncommon—the most notable being the flipside of the Kumasi Trio's recording, appropriately titled "Amponsah - Part 2." Many who study African popular music consider 12/8 rhythms t to be more traditional than the 4/4 time signature, which may have been introduced

on the coast along with the guitar and a Western sense of harmony and harmonic progression[66]. Most of the repertoire of palmwine Rhythms discussed in Chapter II are metered 4/4 and illustrate the hybridization of African and European aesthetics.

In Ghanaian traditional music, the percussion ensemble is considered to be at forefront, supporting and being supported by the voice or dance[67]. In palmwine music, the percussion assumes an accompaniment role, with the guitar and vocal improvisations foregrounded. In this way, palmwine music is more like the music of the seprewa soloist than the drum ensemble, but the core rhythms are shared. As in percussion ensemble music, there are central timelines usually played on one of a number of bells. One rhythm frequently used is the bell pattern from kpanlogo—a Ga rhythm, as follows:

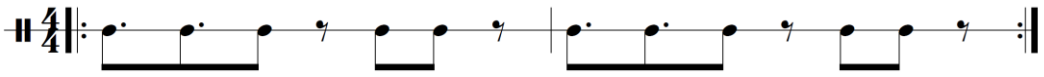


Figure 4.9: Kpanlogo bell pattern or timeline.

This bell pattern is not used on early palmwine recordings but starts making more of an appearance in the Highlife of the 1950s and 1960s. This rhythm is seen reflected in the vocal theme of Figure 4.4. The rhythm is old, and with one

[66] There is also evidence of 4/4 time signature music predating this era of contact with Europe, and I wish to avoid making too bold a claim. The fact remains that many European musical aesthetics accompany the guitar upon its arrival.

[67] In truth, we should not separate out dance, vocal, and drumming components to the larger musical works—they are necessarily entwined and co-dependent.

foot in the African experience in the Americas[68], but the kpanlogo drum and dance is relatively modern—a product of the post-independence creative boom. John Collins says that its roots are in the following 12/8 rhythm (Hornak and Ray 2011):

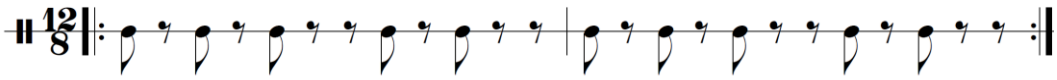


Figure 4.10: 12/8 roots of kpanlogo bell.

While kpanlogo is frequently present, the defining accompaniment rhythm of Yaa Amponsah and much Ghanaian popular music is the set of three equidistant, off-beat percussion strokes that land on the eighth notes following beats 2, 3, and 4. This is the cobbler's rhythm I discussed in the opening of this thesis. In *The African Imagination in Music*, Kofi Agawu refers to it as the "highlife timeline" (Agawu 2016, 176) because of its ubiquity in Ghanaian popular music. Ashanti drummer Attah Poku says that it is a *sikyi* rhythm, as it is found in the foundation of that percussion repertoire (Poku 2019). Most Ghanaian highlife musicians looked at me quizzically when I asked what this rhythm was named—the three stroke pattern simply is *highlife*. As Ekow Paintsil explained, "No individual can own it and give it a name." I would add that in Ghana music, you can not run away from it—it will always appear.

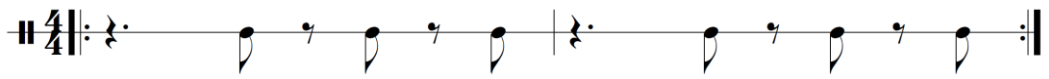


Figure 4.11: The "highlife timeline," the "Up-Up-Up," or the cobbler's rhythm.

[68] Koo Nimo calls Pat Thomas' version of this clave "Latin," connecting it to Caribbean music. In Afro-Cuban music the rhythm used by Thomas is called "Rumba Clave," and the kpanlogo pattern is called the "3-2 Clave."

This pattern is usually played on a bell, most commonly the *frikywa*, though it is sometimes played on the Ashanti *dawuro*, or "clips" (wooden sticks, or clave). The dawuro is a large Ashanti bell, about the size and shape of a plantain and sometimes called a "banana bell." Much as guitarists personalize *Amponsah* to express their unique voice, Koo Nimo has his signature version of this accompaniment rhythm which he had his engineer and assistant Samuel Asare play for me. The instrument is the dawuro, and the higher notes here are produced by rubbing the iron beater across the top of the bell to produce a shuffling sound. I've beamed this transcription conventionally to the beat, and the brackets above represent the phrase sub-groupings.

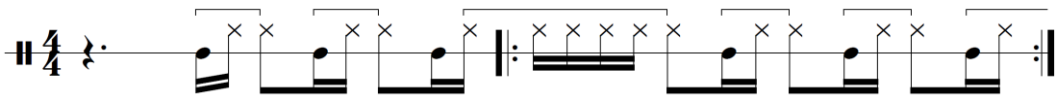


Figure 4.12: Koo Nimo Signature Up-Up-Up.

This is also the rhythm of Koo Nimo's iconic theme (Figure 4.1) and of Asare's guitar melody (Figure 4.5) and the percussion accompaniment in the Kumasi Trio's recording. While generally part of highlife, both Aka and Koo consider it to be an essential component of *Amponsah*.

This rhythmic motif is closely connected to a pattern within some 12/8 rhythms of the Ashanti, and it is quite possible that the 4/4 "up-up-up" theme evolved from this motif. It is most commonly played on the *ntrowa*, the Ashanti's calabash shaker, and sits in the timeline as follows:

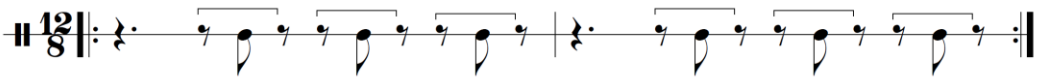


Figure 4.13: Ashanti Ntrowa Pattern.

12/8 rhythms are favored in traditional African music for their greater potential for rhythmic variation and subdivision, but it is helpful to think of this time signature as having a basic four feel, or four pulse phrase, with each pulse having a triplet subdivision. The three strokes of the ntrowa fall on the second triplet subdivision of pulses 2, 3, and 4, or the "&" of "2-**&**-a, 3-**&**-a, 4-**&**-a." My brackets in Figure 4.12 are meant to show these pulse groupings.

In the Kumasi Trio's 12/8 "Amponsah - Part 2," we see how the musicians adapt their *Amponsah* themes to this time signature, and how they express Koo Nimo's iconic theme. On this recording, the percussionist Kwah Kanta plays on an all-wooden adakim box drum—there is no head made of hide as with most Ghanaian drums.

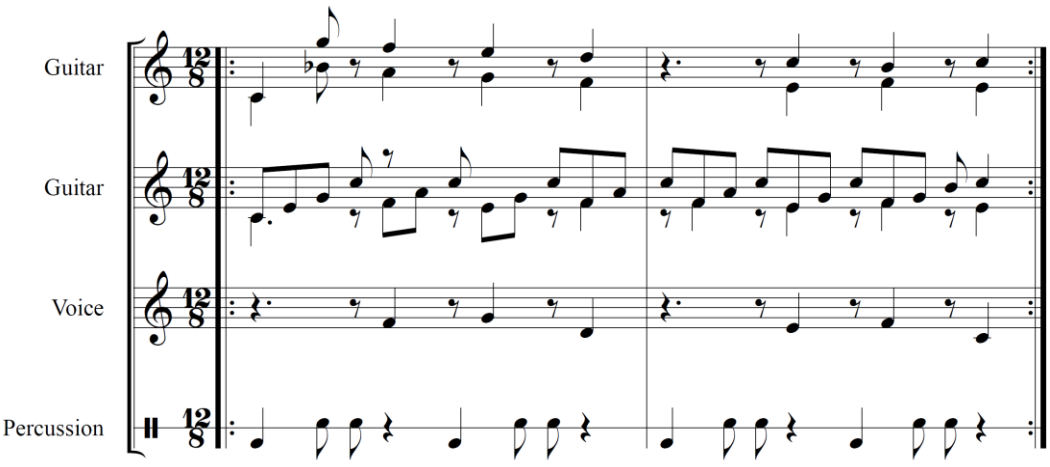


Figure 4.14: Kumasi Trio, "Amponsah - Part 2" (1928).

Kanta's playing helps anchor our ear correctly within the rhythm and confirms the guitar alignment we expect to see[69]. Melodies A and B are intact on guitar and have shifted to accommodate the 12/8 off-beat of Figure 4.13. The backing vocal which appears part way through the recording also expresses this melody and rhythm. The syncopation seen at the end of Koo Nimo's theme resolves the dominant to the tonic is present, as is the movement from the E, or Major 3rd of the tonic, to the C on the downbeat of the phrase.

The rhythm of the accompanying guitar is worth comment here. While modern Ghanaian guitarists have mastery of many global styles, the palmwine guitar style is played primarily with a two-finger method: thumb and index. As expected, the thumb strikes the low register strings to produce the bass notes, but in the *Amponsah* Rhythm the Ghanaian player shifts these thumb notes off of the strongest beats. This is quite unlike most American fingerstyle guitar playing, and places weight on the "up-up-up" subdivision. We see the same approach in the following performance by Akablay, now in 4/4 time:

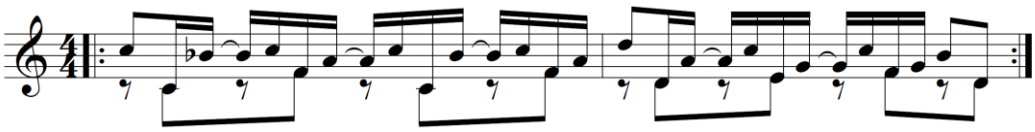


Figure 4.15: Fingerstyle Counterpoint, Akablay, 2008.

The notes of strongest emphasis are all finger notes in the treble range. This includes the downbeat of the phrase, but the place of greatest emphasis is the

[69] While the guitar parts are a little difficult to disentwine on the 78rpm recording, I feel confident about this transcription in general. There are variations from measure to measure across the performance.

fourth subdivision of each beat. These appear above as the tied notes, and their longer duration makes them dominate the rhythm—an "agogic" emphasis. This highly syncopated style, along with the bass syncopation and leading treble is similar in Aka's contemporary performance and the second guitar in "Amponsah - Part 2."

III: Harmony

The harmonic variations of Yaa Amponsah are in some ways its signature contribution to Ghanaian popular music. Of all the palmwine Rhythms, it is the one with the most expansive set of variations, substitutions, chromaticism, and leading tones. The family of *Ɔdɔ Nsan* progressions has a number of reharmonizations, though these are typically relative major/minor substitutions—wonderful, but not as adventurous. *Ɔdɔ Nsan*'s simpler progression is the movement between two tonal centers, one degree apart in the scale, and while the form and harmonic rhythm can be quite sophisticated, the harmony mostly consists of two triads with their substitutions and diatonic chord extensions (for example: F, Dm, G, Em, Dm^7, Em^7, F^6, G^6, and G^7). As discussed in Chapter II, the *Ɔdɔ Nsan* is a descendent of the repertoire and style of song written for the seprewa harp.

In *Amponsah* the harmonic choices are more complex and specific substitutions can become a musician's signature personalization of the Rhythm. The fundamental harmonic or chord progression underpinning *Amponsah* is[70]:

|I I^7 |IV V^7 | *or* **|C C^7 |F G^7 |**

I have written this in C because it is the guitarist's key of preference for *Amponsah*. For the guitarist this is not a matter of avoiding sharps and flats which are of no concern—it has everything to do with what is idiomatic to the guitar within the instrument's C position. As both Bright and Koo stated, C is chosen because of the "free notes" (i.e. open strings). It is the key of the Kumasi Trio's recording and presents voicing choices for both harmony and melody that have become idiomatic for *Amponsah* when played on the guitar. In some examples such as Koo Nimo in Figure 4.8 (key of D Major) and Kofi Elektrik in Figure 5.15 (key of G Major), a different key is used but is achieved through the use of a capo[71], a transposition device that allows the guitarist to play positionally as if they are in C, but to produce a different concert pitch[72]. Certain

[70] Here and below I use the Nashville numbering system for representing chords with Roman numerals. Upper case roman numerals represent Major triads, and lower case represent minor triads, which we see more of in Chapter V.

[71] The "capo" dates to 18th century Europe. It is a simple device which attaches around the neck of the guitar creating a barre at any position desired. Historically called "capotasto" or "capodaster," it gets its name from the Italian word "capo" meaning "head"—the guitarist makes a new "head" for the guitar, facilitating transposition. Ghanaians call it "capu."

[72] In standard tuning the guitar works in five interlocking positions which are used to play music in any of the twelve keys. These five positions are referred to by chord shapes as they exist in open position. C, A, G, E, and D chord shapes are used as fingering positions for the tonic chord of all the keys as the player ascends the neck. Players can use or not use a capo to achieve the transposition of the position, and in my experience most professional African players are very comfortable with both methods. Using the C position as a movable barre shape is far more common among African players than American.

chord voicings appearing in *Amponsah* share a geometric logic that only a guitarist can intuit and are specific to the palmwine guitarists' repertoire.

The appearance of the C^7 as a tonic chord—or specifically as a secondary dominant moving to IV—is a signature aesthetic of the Ghanaians that does not appear in most older coastal palmwine Rhythms, though can in some *Mainlines*. It is said that the use of the flatted seven by Gold Coast palmwine players working in the Belgian Congo (known as coastmen) so delighted their Congolese audience that they would call for the note, and that the desire for the "seven" gave its name to the hot section at the end of a Congolese rumba tune in later years—the "sebene" (Stewart 2000, 28–29).

In its palmwine variations, the chord progression is often expanded with a much faster *harmonic rhythm*[73]. The placement of chords within barlines can be problematic, however. As in the preceding examples we see that the harmony—facilitated either by the melody or the accompanying guitar—shifts and resolves in an anticipatory manner and on the upbeat to the pulse we might expect. I will precede with this barring model to mark the measures or phrases. One common palmwine example is:

|C C^7 Dm^7 C^7 |F^6 / C G^7| *or* **|I^7 iim^7 I^7 |IV^6 / I V^7|**

[73] Harmonic rhythm is the rate and structure of harmonic change in a piece of music.

Koo Nimo's theme fits this variation. Also, these harmonies can be seen as an elaboration of the core melody described above. A different variant taught to me by Akablay is similar:

|C C^7 F C^7 |F^6 Dm^7 C/G G^7| *or* **|I I^7 IV^7 I^7 |IV^6 iim^7 I V^7|**

On my first visit to Ghana in 2008, Aka shared with me a guitar method book[74] he had handwritten and which I had photocopied at Busy Internet in Nkrumah Circle. This was Aka's first attempt at creating a pedagogical method for Ghana guitar music—an impulse that is both entrepreneurial and altruistic. In the extract below, Aka sketches out the guitarist's chord shapes for *Amponsah* with an abundance of substitutions:

[74] The book was visionary, and while I still have my photocopy, Aka lost the original after moving between houses sometime around 2013. Despite my efforts to work with him to revise and publish this book, there was not much interest in the States for a book or a professionally produced pedagogical DVD.

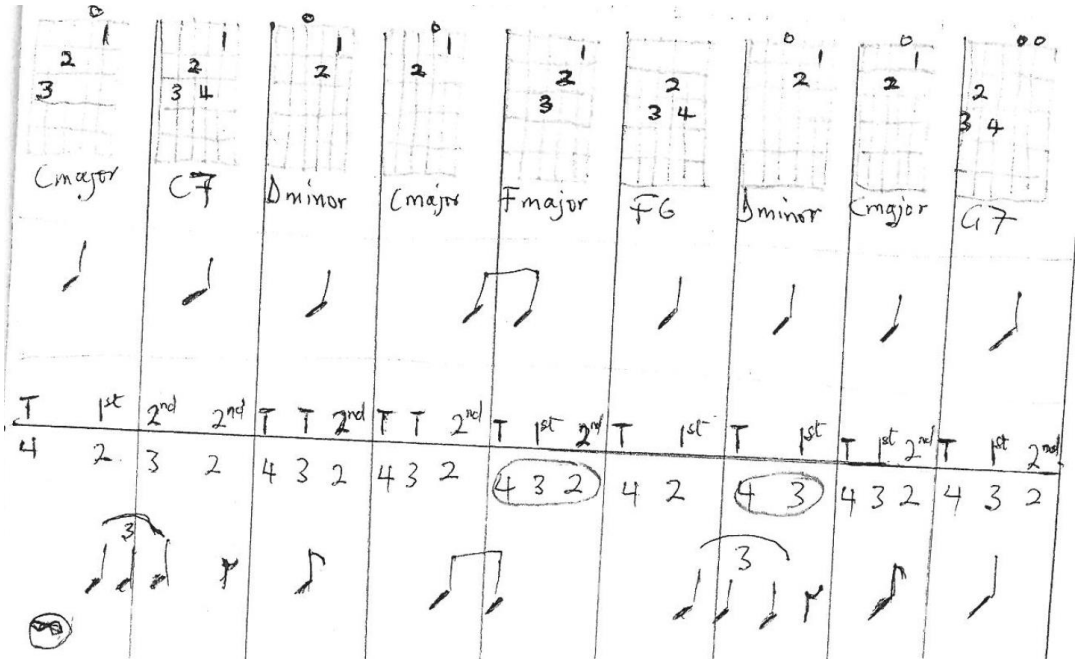


Figure 4.16: Page from Akablay's hand-written Ghana Guitar method book (Akablay 1990s).

Below I clarify how to decipher the manuscript, with the caveat that Western notation is not Aka's normal musical terrain, and rhythms should be understood gesturally. The first row of quarter and eighth notes refer to the amount of time to spend on each shape. The "T," "1st," and "2nd" refer to fingers on the right hand. The next set of numbers may refer to the strings to play, and the notes at the bottom are his approximation of the rhythm. Though this rhythm and some of this other information are inaccurate, we would be foolish to be unduly critical—Aka was presenting his deep musical and cultural knowledge in a notation that is hybridized, and his contribution here is unique and valuable.

The most interesting information is his presentation of the chord shapes across the top. The numbers within the fingerboard grids represent the fingers

of the fretting hand. I want to draw attention to the C^7 chord, and the triangle shape of fingers 3-2-4. In this chord, the three pitches fingered (low to high) are root, Major third, and flatted seventh. This shape or, mini-position, reveals itself as central to the idiomatic voicing choices of the palmwine player. Observe how the F^6 is the exact shape shifted over one string—the presence of a sixth harmony here is otherwise surprising but appears almost ubiquitously in palmwine songs because of this kinetic symmetry. Note also the atypical choice of G^7, a voicing rarely seen in other guitar traditions. Again, this is the same mini-position—shifted across the fingerboard with the same fingering—and ends up producing the essential inner melody Koo presented in Figure 4.1. This shape produces multiple harmonies used in the song—including one striking diminished example presented below—and I redirect our attention to the tactile logic underlying the decision-making that specific instrumentalists employ. *Amponsah* as we have it could not have been written on another instrument. Guitar is truly the site of synthesis of all of these traditional and imported musical inputs. I now proceed to consider a pair of "modern" harmonies that get introduced within the context of this fretboard logic.

In 2019 I pushed Akablay to tell me the foundational chord progression without substitutions, and he told me unhesitatingly:

|C Am |F G^7 | *or* **|I vi |IV V^7 |**

I pointed out to him that in his own playing he never plays the Am, which surprised him, but is largely true. The Am could be used as relative minor substitution for the C, though it is not a change heard often. It is a useful bridge, however to some very deep transfigurations of *Amponsah* in the work of Ebo Taylor and Alhadji Frimpong which I will discuss in Chapter V.

While I did not encounter the A minor chord that Aka mentioned, one very common substitution that also introduces chromaticism is the use of an A Major or A^7 in the second half of the first measure—which bolsters the argument for an A minor in the same place. With the introduction of the C♯, this functions as a secondary dominant moving to the D^{min}/F^6 tonality. This decidedly modern variation is frequently seen in early African American jazz, and becomes fairly common in *Amponsah*. The following example is very much like one of Koo Nimo's variations but comes from a 1983 lesson tape made by Kwaa Mensah for John Collins[75]. In this series of recordings Mensah demonstrates all of the early palmwine Rhythms as he understood them, and this *Amponsah* is presented as the style of his uncle, Jacob Sam.

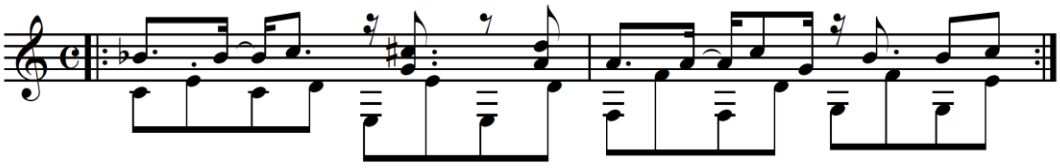


Figure 4.16: Kwaa Mensah Variation in the style of Jacob Sam (1983).

[75] Note that this recording is in the key of B Major. I believe that either the guitar was tuned a half-step flat or the tape recording machine as at the wrong speed.

The bassline is much like Koo Nimo's as seen in Figure 4.3, and we can see how the voice-leading connects the C to the Dm or F^6 chord. Another way to look at the substitution is as an altered dominant substitution for the C^7, i.e. this is a $C^{7\flat9}$ chord (C E G B♭ C♯/D♭), or by extension a C♯ diminished seven chord (C♯ E G B♭)—also a common early jazz substitution heard on the earliest recordings of King Oliver and Louis Armstrong ("Dippermouth Blues," "Potato Head Blues"), and it is possible that this substitution is influenced by exposure to imported records and radio broadcast.[76] This diminished substitution for the C^7 has the same spelling ($C\sharp^{dim}$ = C♯ E G B♭)[77] as a substitution for the A^7 chord ($B\flat^{dim}$ = B♭ C♯ E G).

The following variation from Koo Nimo extends his bass motif from the earlier example and includes a chord substitution in the third beat of the first measure that presents as a $C\sharp^{dim7}$ (C^7 altered dominant):

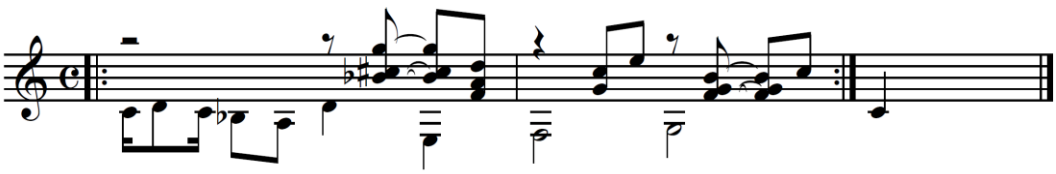


Figure 4.17: Koo Nimo diminished substitution.

This diminished chord is not just notable for its extended harmony and voice leading to the F^6 chord, but for its use of the same three-finger mini-position introduced with the C^7 voicing, now re-located on strings 1, 2, and 3,

[76] Armstrong's trip to Ghana was in 1956, and more listening is necessary to trace the first introduction of these substitutions.

[77] I knowingly use this mix of sharp and flat enharmonic spellings because it helps to illustrate the possible substitutions of A^7, $A^{7\flat9}$, and $C^{7\flat9}$

and producing a new harmony as the shape is placed on different strings and new chords are produced as determined by the guitar's unique and non-parallel tuning. It appears that some harmonic choices are being made based upon an aesthetic of consonance and dissonance, and some are based on an ergonomic aesthetic unique to the guitar composer. An extended variation of this comes in a long set of diminished and half-diminished chord substitutions in the style of the Kumasi-based guitarist Kwabena "King" Onyina. Onyina introduced many chord substitutions on his electric guitar beginning in the 1950s. His work brought *Amponsah* and highlife guitar forward into a new era with songs like "Akwantu Mu Nsem." These harmonies and his method of replacing fingerstyle counterpoint with block chords moved the music away from palmwine and into the "guitar band" style highlife.

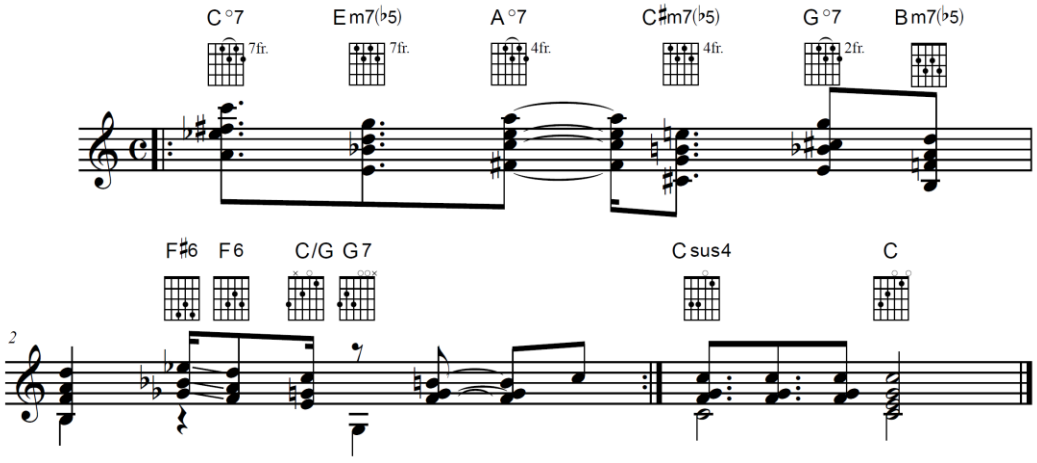


Figure 4.18: Onyina diminished chord run for Yaa Amponsah.

We can see that in addition to introducing a large number of full-diminished 7 and half-diminished (i.e. minor 7 flatted fifth) chords, Onyina is adhering to this same kinetic logic of the chord shape as he develops his motif. Onyina moves

the single shape to different places on the neck and resolving down to the F^6, the three notes of which (F A D) reside in the $Bm^{7\flat5}$ This is the same three note mini-shape, but with one additional note added to the bottom.

The closing harmony of this variation suspends the tonic, disrupting the triadic harmony by raising the third to a fourth. This harmonic device is prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in guitar band performances. The substitution can occur mid-song, and often ends a performance. This suspension and resolution can be considered a plagal cadence and illustrates the colonial influence of Anglican hymns upon Ghanaian musicians. This plagal cadence is one modification that George Spratz also demonstrated and which he regularly uses to blend the *Amponsah* with Church music. He identifies this as a device that is taken specifically from hymnal music.

A Note on the Frame

An argument could be made that the barring of my measures should be different. Certainly, representations of African music within European notational constructs have always been fraught, and I often think of an exchange I had with Koo Nimo when I stayed with him in 2013. We were working on the 6/8 *Adwoa* rhythm—and I was struggling to hear how the bell rhythm and his guitar accompaniment fit together. "Please, Papa," I joked, "I want a 'one'!" Koo smiled and said, half-patiently, "I know," before setting down his guitar and ending our session for the day.

While I am confident of the placement of the strong pulse, or beat, it is possible that the *Amponsah* progression could more accurate be barred in this way:

|C^7 F |G^7 C |

This is how Koo Nimo once described it to me, specifying "I IV V I," which would bring it more in line with a related progression and rhythm heard in the palmwine music of Sierra Leone, and is very similar to the "jive" and kwela rhythm of South Africa. The American would incline to bar this other Rhythm as follows:

|C^7 F |C/G G^7 |

However, it is likely that this progression is more accurately barred as follows:

|F C/G |G^7 C^7 |

Both of these changes to the rhythmic frameworks are extrapolated from melodic phrasing. Further, Aka starts the Jewel Ackah song discussed in Chapter III on the F chord. I made my decision for the layout of the bars based upon the location of the up-up-up rhythm (Figure 4.11), and I stand by it, but it is worth periodically checking our assumptions.

I have likewise engaged in several conversations about the orientation of that first Kumasi Trio recording. Two knowledgeable ethnomusicologists have suggested that the three percussion strokes of "Amponsah - Part 1" are actually

on, and not off, the beat—and I agree that this is very much how it sounds. John Collins' theory is that the Trio, recording in London, sought to please the English record label by playing less syncopated music. It is hard to decipher this, partly due to the recording technique and murky 78rpm disk, and partly due to the great velocity of the performance.

I asked Koo Nimo for his advice regarding the placement of the beat in the Kumasi Trio's "Amponsah – Part 1". Koo is hesitant to contradict his friend Dr. Collins. After some thought, he offered me the following advice:

> I play *Amponsah*, I come in when I like, and it fits. I've been made aware that there's something somewhere, something like… gravity, which you must find. When Galileo saw the watchman hanging the lantern on the wall it was dangling. He had no watch. His watch was his heartbeat. He knew the length of the pendulum, he knew the period—he used 22 over 7—then, he knew the length. Then the G which is something [tapping on the table] that he had to find. Gravity.

In one sense I believe this was a lesson about perspective, but it was also about flexibility. He then proceeded to improvise with the *Amponsah* melody, shifting it over an eighth note within the harmonic structure, and then an eighth note further—and then he suggested that I notate all the possibilities for us to study! Throughout, however, the core components of melody, harmony, and rhythm were there—and he never shifted the three-note up-up-up back on to the beat.

In all of my interviews with Ghanaian guitarists they unreservedly stated that the three-stroke percussion of the Kumasi Trio recording is off the beat—

that it *has* to be like this. Aka demonstrated the rhythm's placement by playing along with the 1928 recording in the idiomatic guitar style. I also interviewed two Ghanaian percussionists: the Ashanti court drummer, Emmanuel Attah Poku, and Dagomba musician Mohammed Alidu. They agreed that there is precedence for both the on and offbeat three note timeline. The onbeat timeline can be found in a rhythm called "bɔbɔɔbɔ" by the Ashantis, or "apɛsɛ" by the Ewe people. They contrasted this with the upbeat iteration, which they called "sikyi."[78] Both musicians insisted unhesitatingly that Kumasi Trio used the sikyi, or upbeat, rhythm. In conclusion, Alidu stated that the musicians were Fante as further evidence of the use of the upbeats (Alidu and Poku 2019). I completed two transcriptions of the Trio recording—one on the beat which appears in Appendix II, and the correct transcription off the beat which follows:

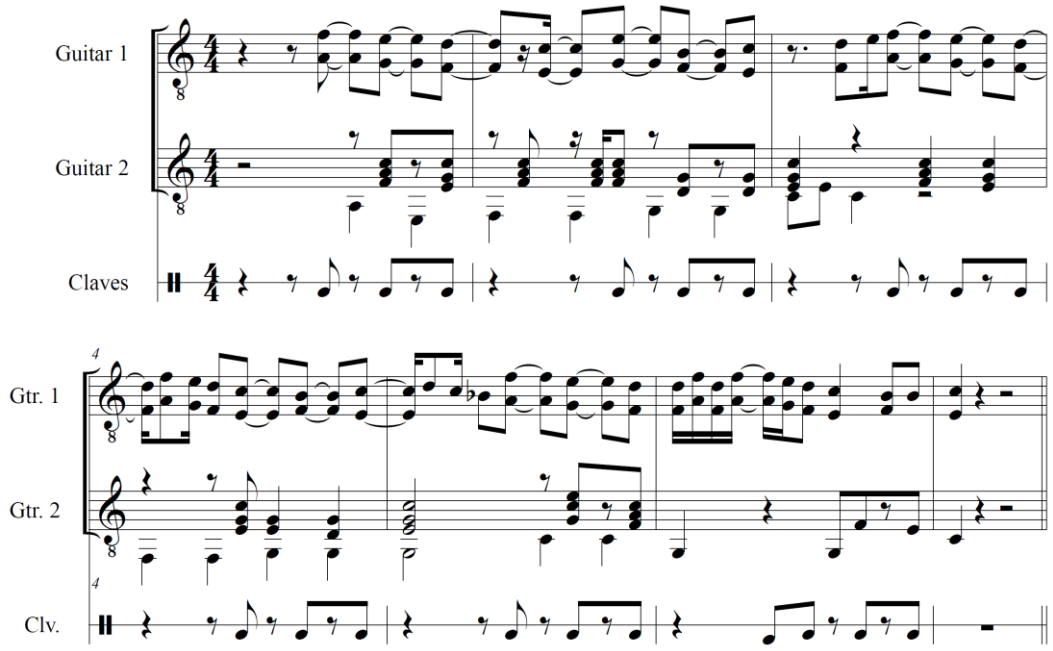


Figure 4.19: Kumasi Trio, "Amponsah - Part 1" (1928).

[78] Note that the "sikyi" style when referred to guitarist is a minor key *Ɔdɔ Nsan* related to Kwaw.

The rhythm, harmonic, and melodic changes in this off-beat transcription all comply with our expectations as established in this chapter.

Folkloric Representations

In this section I present four folkloric examples to show what is common in idioms that are more traditional or more archival. I am using the term "folkloric" here in the manner used by interviewees. By "folkloric," these musicians mean music in a traditional style that predates recorded or copyright music. Elektrik uses the term in Chapter V to describe *Amponsah* to Americans, but is also conveying Ghanaian ownership with the word, which is central to the formation of the National Folklore Board. Taylor uses it to describe all of Asare's songs at his grandfather's funeral, because they are of the classic palmwine style, and not the later highlife music. For Mamady Kouyate and Osei Korankye, "folkloric" also refers to the traditional music that predates recorded music and copyright—these are songs that are shared by all in the community and that often originate upon traditional instruments.

The earliest record of the song in any form is the 1927 article by W.E. Ward in the *Gold Coast Review* which I discuss in Chapter II. He spells the title "Ya Amponsah" and offers three transcriptions—one in G Major and two in B♭ Major—which show different aspects of a vocal melody, and that do not vary significantly.

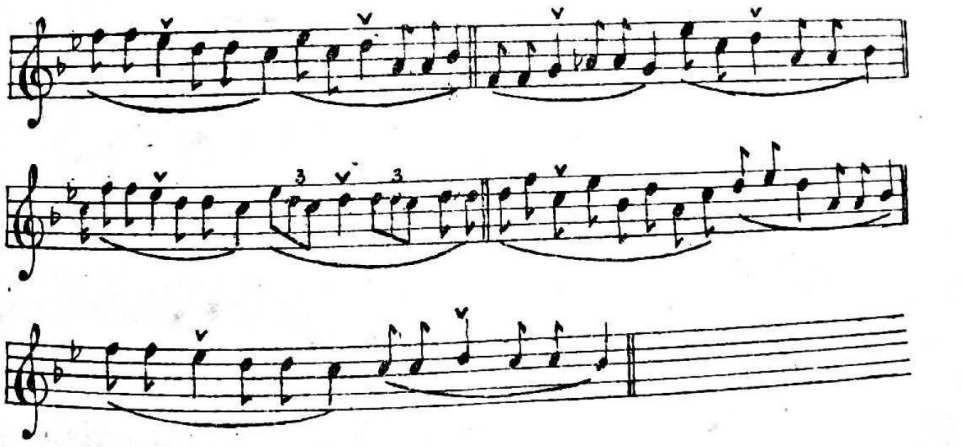


Figure 4.20: W.E. Ward transcription (Ward 1927, 205).

He eschews bar lines, bracketing the phrase itself instead. However, note that he places the resolution of the melody/harmony at the end of the phrase as well, though missing the syncopation of the melody and any mention of accompaniment.

Koo Nimo performed a remarkably different interpretation of *Amponsah* for me during my 2019 visit. He attributed the style to that of guitarist Kwabena Amoah. Koo learned of Amoah through a recording played for him by his close friend, Prof. J.H.K. Nketia[79]. Amoah approaches his *Amponsah* more like an *Ɔdɔ Nsan*, seeming to shift between only two tonal centers, in a style that Koo calls "modal"[80], but which other musicians call "Kwaw" in tribute to guitarist Kwaa

[79] I later uncovered a praise song entitled "Kwabena Amoah" that was recorded by Nana Kwame Ampadu of the African Brothers Band International in 1975. I do not know, however, if this is the track that Nketia played for Koo Nimo, and that Koo over the years had confused the title and performer, or if Ampadu's song is a tribute to the musician Kwabena Amoah who performed the track that Nketia had shared. The Ampadu song is very similar to Koo's performance.

[80] "Modal" is a term also used by both Francophone and English-speaking Malian musicians with whom I've worked. For them, the word is used to distinguish a piece that is not in either Major or minor pentatonic tonality, but is instead built upon the second degree of the Major pentatonic scale, i.e. A B D E G is the G Major pentatonic rooted on A, having scale degrees R 2 4 5 ♭7.

Mensah.[81] This style uses either IV and V or IV and iii chords, or some combination, and is like all *Ɔdɔ Nsan* songs, descending from the music of the seprewa harp. Here is an extract of what Koo Nimo played for me:

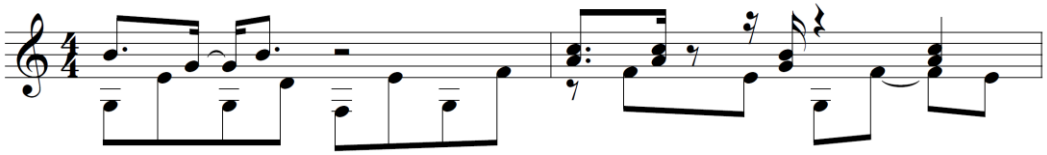


Figure 4.21: Modal Amponsah in the style of Kwabena Amoah.

In Koo's performance, the ear hears more than just the IV and V chords associated with Kwaw. The critical element present in this interpretation is the iconic three note theme appearing on the upbeat of pulses 2, 3, and 4 of both measures, as I first presented in Figure 4.1, and the anticipatory harmonic changes. The final note of the second measure gestures at a resolution back to a C tonic by landing on an E, but keeping in the ambiguous Kwaw style. The notes in measure one/beat one would normally imply a G^6 tonality, but here imply a C/G.

In Chapter II, I discussed the influence of the seprewa harp upon both string music technique in Ghana and upon song forms, most specifically *Ɔdɔ Nsan*. I met with Osei Korankye in 2018 for a long lesson on basic technique, and he include a seprewa *Amponsah*. Osei was brought to teach at the University of Ghana, Legon, by Prof Nketia in 1996. He learned the instrument from his

[81] There are multiple spellings for the name. Collins always uses "Kwaa" for Kwaa Mensah.

grandfather and at this time his family were among the last of the seprewa players.

When we met for our session, Osei's seprewa was tuned to the key of A, though he plays in multiple keys. In A the right hand has strings A, C♯, E, and G (R-3-5-♭7 of an A^7 chord), and the left hand is one step higher with strings B, D, F♯, and A (R-3-5-7 of a B^{min7} chord). I have transposed his playing to the key of C Major to expedite analytical comparison. In this transcription, all right-hand notes are indicated by upward-pointing stems, and all left-hand notes are indicated by downward pointing stems, which gives us some sense of the manual counterpoint in the style. Below, I present some of the variations that he played:

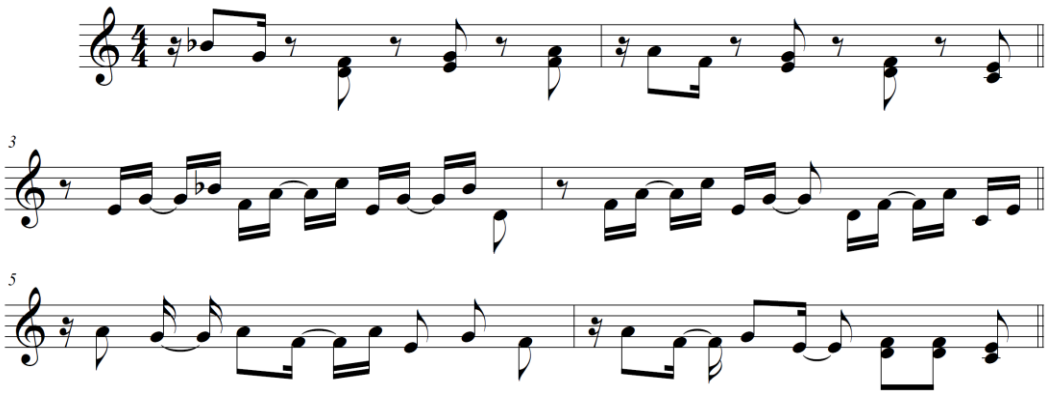


Figure 4.22: Osei Korankye Seprewa Amponsah (2017).

The tuning is well-suited for emphasizing the dominant seven in the tonic chord. Additionally, we see Koo Nimo's iconic theme with resolution to the tonic on the final eighth note of the phrase. In the second line, Osei plays a syncopated accompaniment that is a nearly identical rhythm to that played by Akablay in Figure 4.15. It is difficult to say for certain to what degree these methods and themes descend to the guitar from the seprewa or to what degree they are

methods that have migrated to the seprewa players' language from decades of the guitar's dominance. Osei's playing is almost entirely folkloric and traditional, so it is logical to conjecture an old connection.

My final folkloric example is a very rare performance on the mandolin by one of the continent's last practitioners. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American musical practices began to emigrate to coastal Africa, brought both by trade and by peoples of African heritage who were repatriating from the Americas. Early palmwine and juju ensembles can, in many ways, resemble American string bands consisting of some combination of guitars, banjos, fiddles, and mandolins. While violin has continued to be played in Ghana, it has been primarily in the classical conservatory context. Ghanaian mandolin playing had virtually disappeared but for an Ewe musician living near Kokrobite along the coast to the west of Accra. His name was Kwame Teiko, and he was known as Pa Pa Tee. I first became aware of Teiko's music in 2008, and my traveling partner Doug Brush made a series of recordings of him playing solo mandolin and of his group, the Beach Scorpions. I looked for Pa Pa Tee on subsequent trips, and in 2019 was able to interview his wife, Joyce of Africa, who told me that Pa Pa had died in 2017.

Pa Pa Tee's playing featured a mix of traditional songs, Rhythms and palmwine vocabulary, together with some modern fusions. In addition to Doug's field recordings, the band—with Pa Pa, Joyce on percussion, and Anthony Scorpion[82] on vocals and guitar—recorded some sides at Bokoor Studio with John Collins. The song "Friends Today, Enemies Tomorrow" from these sessions is an *Amponsah*, and as so often the case, it is played in C.

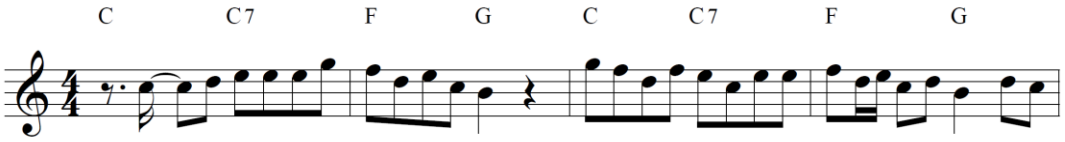


Figure 4.23: Kwame "Pa Pa Tee" Teiko, Mandolin Yaa Amponsah, (c. 1980s).

These two variations are extracted from Teiko's opening lead line to the song. In measure 1, we start with two dotted eighth notes, which is the same syncopation as the basic vocal melody. In measures 2, 3, and 4, we see melodies descending in thirds. This is also played on guitar, and notable here, as thirds are a less common interval choice on mandolin. Given this instrument's tuning of fifths, the inverted third or sixth is the player's preferred harmonization. Finally, on the last beat in measure 4, we see the typical resolution to the tonic on the phrase's final eighth note.

[82] Scorpion, or Anthony Scorpion, has commercial recordings from Ghana and Nigeria that date back to the 1970s, some of which are under the name of the *Beach Scorpions*, but most of which do not include Teiko on mandolin.

Conclusions

In a conversation with the incoming president of the Ghana musicians' union, MUSIGA, Bessa Simons told me a story about the funeral of Kwame Asare in the 1950s. Simons said that he had been told that as a memorial, all of the current guitarists came together and played a concert—each performing their own version of "Yaa Amponsah" (Simons 2019). He acknowledged that this might be only legend, and in fact no other person I spoke to had heard this story. But I love the legend anyway—it tickles the brain to imagine such a gathering, and it both sustains the *Amponsah* origin story and places value in the continued and evolving conversation that is Ghanaian music. This is a clear manifestation of the principle of sankofa—go back and bring the past forward. In Asare's imagined memorial we see the variations and developments of Ghana's musicians as grounded in a tradition, uniquely individual, and culturally unified.

What are the components that define this song/Rhythm as itself, and distinguish it from another similar but distinctly different song? Many Ghanaian songs are *Amponsahs* though they may share none of the lyric or melodic material. Certainly, there needs to be more than the **|I I^7 |IV V^7 |** chord progression to be an *Amponsah*, for there are countless unrelated songs from other nations that share this chord progression. Yet unquestionably for those who are fluent in the Rhythm—whether culturally or as a practicing musician—

you know it when you hear it.[83] When playing my cache of recordings of *Amponsahs* for Ghanaian musicians, they would frequently jump in with the melody or a rhythm or sing along—and as often as not they would sing parts that were not explicitly played on the recording, because they heard an essence that is more than a simple melody.

The individual components of *Amponsah* can vary from performance to performance, but are drawn from the common pool of melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic resources that I have outlined in this chapter's many transcriptions. Koo Nimo's iconic theme contains principles of all three categories. The theme is present in many of the performances, though it is never foregrounded and can be overlooked. This theme is the middle voice—not as annunciatory as a melody on the treble strings, nor as weighty and structural as the guitar's bass notes. Its three-note repeated rhythm is rooted in traditional drumming and is the same as the cobbler's rhythm. The pitches of the theme sketch the macro harmony, but also enable the rapid chordal movement of the palmwine player. Additionally, there are melodic conventions in descending thirds, with critical landing points—notably the sixth harmony of a D over an F Major, and the major third of the dominant V chord, then rising to the tonic. Critical is the arrival of harmonies on the anticipatory upbeat. These are some of the most important principles, but

[83] Sumarsam discusses a complicated concept in Javanese gamelan called *lagu*, which is an internal melody created by multiple instruments, and which is often only implied—an "intangible phenomenon" (Sumarsam 1995, 155). While I doubt anyone would mistake a ladrang for an *Ɔdɔ Nsan*, I've thought often of lagu with *Amponsah* while trying to define its essence.

we have explored more. Perhaps most challenging to the scholar who seeks to define *Amponsah* is its core aesthetic value of variation and development.

In the final chapter I will look at examples of the *Amponsah* Rhythm from Ghana that further stretch our understanding of what *Amponsah* can hold. Further, I will compare what we know to examples of *Amponsah* that have propagated in other countries' musical repertoires. Finally, I consider the ramifications as this signature Rhythm spreads in the modern world.

Chapter V: Dimensions & Extensions

Other Voicings

"Af-i-rica, let's move on to Zion, before we lose our way."

Anthony Akablay is singing and playing guitar in my room at the Alegria Guest House. This is one of several of his own songs that utilize elements of *Amponsah*, and one which I've performed with him in past years. We have spent a lot of time this afternoon talking about the necessary musical components in the *Amponsah* Rhythm, and with his own song I see some of my expectations starting to collapse. One thing that is commonly present from the earliest Ghanaian palmwine players is playing the tonic chord (C major triad, or a C major shape played with a capo) with a dominant 7^{th} harmony. "The seven chord is very, very important in Yaa Amponsah," Aka tells me. "You can't play Yaa Amponsah without the seven chord." Typically in this and other early palmwine and highlife songs the chordal harmonies are straightforward and triadic, but with two exceptions: the voice-leading substitutions seen in the use of diminished chords, and the voicings that are clearly shape-driven, which is to say they operate at a level of manual logic to the players' hands (ex. the use of F^6 or unique G^7 shape, and arguably the diminished chords). The I^7 (secondary dominant) and V^7 (dominant) are the common exceptions where chord extensions beyond the 1-3-5 are being implemented toward harmonic ends.

When Aka plays his *Amponsah* song "Africa," he barres everything at his third fret, but is still playing out of C shapes[84] for the key of E♭. Aka plays:

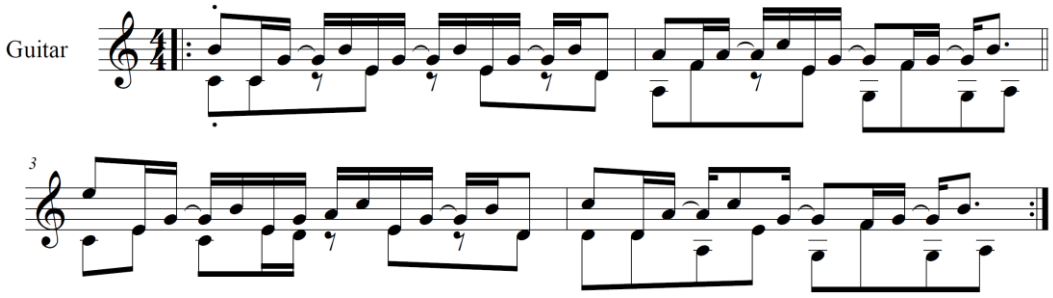


Figure 5.1: Akablay's "Africa" with Major 7 voicings and other substitutions.

While most of the hallmarks of the Rhythm are present—core chord progression, the introduction of additional tonal centers in the second variation, low V^7 voicing, right-hand syncopated rhythm, a variation of Koo Nimo's "up-up-up" iconic theme—the outlier is the absence of the I^7 chord and its replacement with (of all things) a Major seven chord with a B♮ (C-E-G-B). Aka sees this as an acceptable choice within the realm of *Amponsah* development—the Major seven is a logical substitution to the flatted seven, but for Aka it also brings the Rhythm into the realm of a more modern, jazz-influenced, and cosmopolitan harmony. It demonstrates his sophistication and keeps him from being "too local," while still demonstrating the principle of sankofa—"go back and take." When Aka was just beginning his professional career, his mentor and bandleader, Jewel Ackah, bought cassettes for him to study—including several

[84] This concept is discussed in Chapter IV. My transcription reads in C reflecting his guitarism, and for ease in comparing with the other transcriptions. Please note that this barring to the key of E♭ illustrates both Aka's advanced instrumental technique and conceptual sophistication.

by American proto-smooth players Earl Klugh and George Benson[85]. It is this study that has opened so much in Aka's composition, which are a fusion of classic Ghana music with American rock and jazz styles. Witnessing his compositional decision also gives the outsider some insight into the processes by which Ghanaians incorporated innovations to *Amponsah* over the past hundred years.

I asked Akablay if there were any other versions of the *Amponsah* Rhythm that were surprising. I missed it at first, because he was always plucking out songs while we were speaking, but he had begun playing a song I knew. "Fowaa Koa Mamm," (as I knew it) is a song that Kofi and Rambo had taught me, and that the Occidental Brothers had performed many times. The Fante title translates as "Give Me Your Heart." Knowing the song well, I was surprised that Aka would suggest that this was *Amponsah*—especially since the song was in a minor key and therefore unlike any version we had yet discussed. I had asked Koo Nimo if he knew minor versions, and while he was delighted by the prospect of such experiments, he knew of none.

Aka had played this song with Kofi and Rambo as members of the Western Diamonds and they associated it with the singer Paapa Yankson[86].

[85] These guitarists are held in great reverence by many African guitarists ages 65 and down. Though not universally known on the continent, I need both hands to count the number of times I've played "Breezin'" with an African guitarist.

[86] I met Paapa Yankson in Holy Gardens, Nkrumah Circle, on the day after I first arrived in Accra in 2008. Someone has used a picture of the two of us that day on a YouTube video of one of Yankson's songs. Yankson died in 2017.

When I had asked the guys about the song's history, they had said it belonged to the musician C.K. Mann, and it has taken me some time to parse out its details. C.K. Mann was a Fante musician originally from Cape Coast. He had come to his first success in the 1960s playing modernized versions of the fishermen's *osode* Rhythm. Aka told me that he thought that :Fowaa Koa Mamm" was recorded by "Carousel 7"—this was C.K.'s 1970s band that featured singer Kofi "Paapa" Yankson and which recorded for C.K.'s label, the influential Essiebons. Aka continued by suggesting that the song was likely written by that band's guitarist, Ebo Taylor, sung by Yankson, and then both branded and "owned"[87] by Mann and Essiebons music productions. Though Mann possibly did not himself play with the group, the band and song were identified with him. Further research has revealed multiple spellings of the song title, including "Fa W'akoma Ma Me." I had never been able to find a recording of the song with the spelling I had been taught, and only knew it from having my firends sing me the parts in the rehearsal room. It appears on an LP in 1976, the year before Taylor began releasing music under his own name.

So, how could this song that was so unlike the *Amponsah* variations I had learned still be the Rhythm? Here is an excerpt of what Aka played for me:

[87] Ownership in Ghana music is different than in America. A band of this era had an owner who funded and profited from the group, owned the instruments, hired and fired the musicians. For example, the Kumasi band, Dr. K. Gyasi and Noble Kings, has Gyasi's photo on the album covers but he is a doctor and supporter, not a musician.

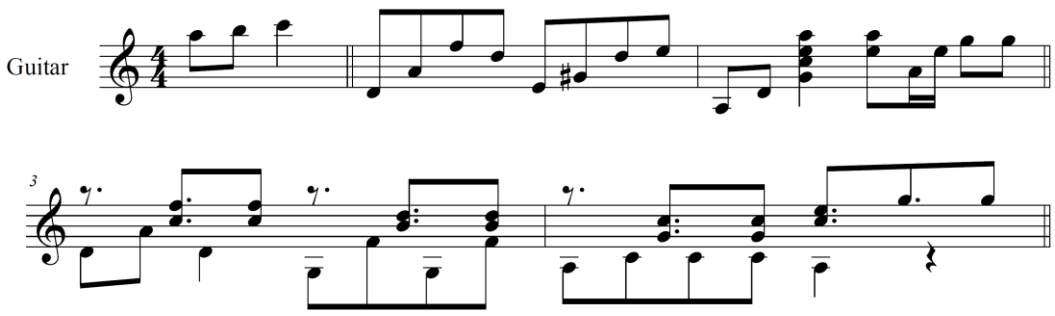


Figure 5.2: Ebo Taylor's "Fa W'akoma Ma Me" as played by Akablay[88].

Looking at the two measure phrases, we see the progression |iv V^7 |i | in the key of A minor. If we flip the placement of these two measures we do see something like the familiar |I |IV V^7| progression from Chapter IV, and the original recording has the up-up-up percussion rhythm inside, as well as call-and-response horn melodies. Two weeks after this conversation with Akablay, I traveled to the village of Saltpond and visited Ebo Taylor. He confirmed unhesitatingly that he wrote the song, and that it is an *Amponsah*—the only minor key version he ever wrote[89]. And, for good measure, he asked me if I would like to record it myself, giving me his blessing to do so (Taylor 2019).

I asked Aka if there were any other songs that were atypical but still considered *Amponsah*. He immediately recalled the artist Alhaji K. Frimpong and an experience early in his professional career. Aka's bandleader had received a request to send musicians to perform with Frimpong on Ghana television. Frimpong had been a member of Dr. K. Gyasi's Noble Kings, and this song had

[88] This transcription, as well as those for "Hwehwe Mu Na Yi Wo Mpena" and "Kyenkyen Bi Adi M'awu" are based upon what Akablay played during our interviews. The well-known studio recordings are full ensemble performances with horns and with many additional parts and melodies, some of which Aka captures in his improvised guitar arrangements.
[89] Ebo has recorded conventional *Amponsahs*: "Palaver," straight "Yaa Amponsah," and others.

been his first big solo hit, 1976's "Kyenkyen Bi Adi M'Awu."[90] Aka demonstrated the song:

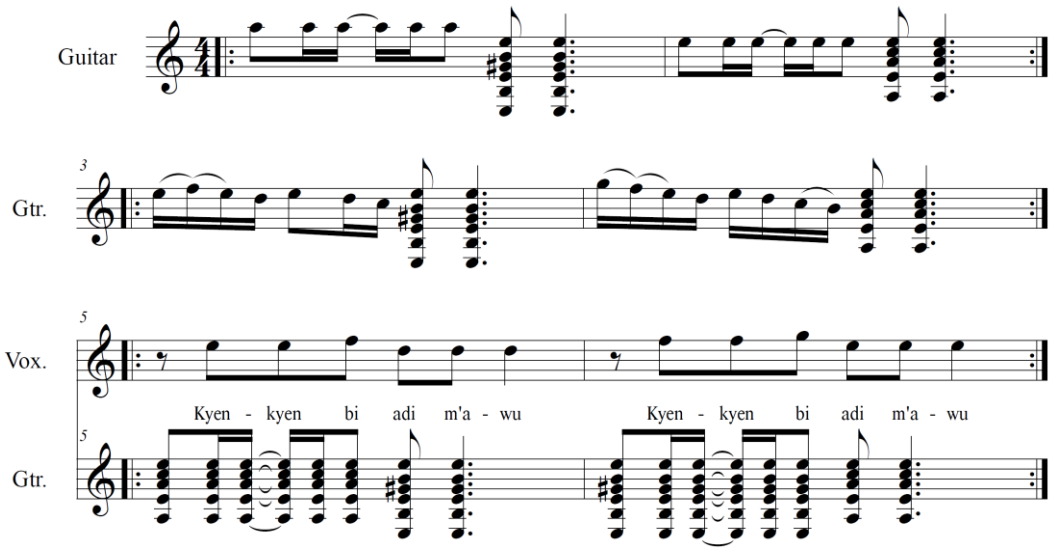


Figure 5.3: Alhaji K. Frimpong's "Kyenkyen Bi Adi M'awu" as played by Akablay.

But how, I asked, is this song an *Amponsah*? Again, it is in a minor key, and in this case has only two chords. Aka responds:

> This song was a *BIG HIT*. Alhaji K Frimpong did it as a solo artist, and then you have to play it on Ghana television. So he come to Jewel Ackah and asked that he wanted the band to play with him on TV. So we had to go to Ghana television and then I was finding it difficult to [starts strumming song awkwardly]—he said "my friend, if you can't do this, *please*, Yaa Amponsah, please. Play Yaa Amponsah." That's what he told me! That's how I know. Very interesting. From the man himself. He said, if you can't do it, play Yaa Amponsah.

Here the elder, also a guitarist, taught young Aka that *Amponsah* was inside of his song, even though it was a minor. I asked Aka to explain further and he sang the song a second time, but now with *Amponsah* chords:

[90] Akablay was born in 1965, so this could not have been in 1976 when the song was first released. I surmise that the broadcast was in the mid-to-late 1980s.

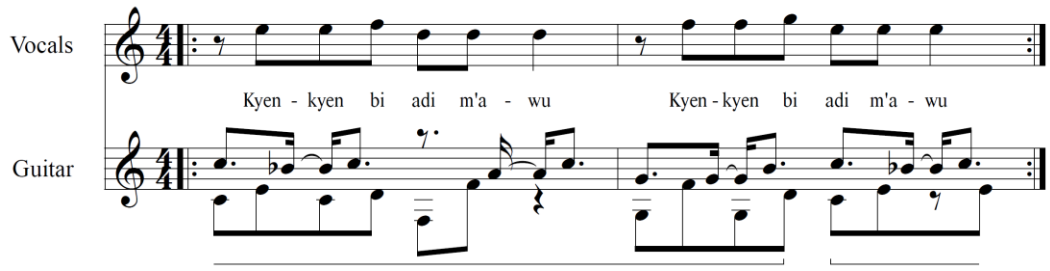


Figure 5.4: Frimpong's "Kyenkyen Bi Adi M'awu" w Aka playing Major Amponsah.

My bracket in this transcription shows the conventional beginning and ending of the *Amponsah* guitar part along the bottom. The barring of the measures preserves the phrasing of the preceding minor key transcription in Figure 5.3, though I acknowledge that these measure demarcations are my own and that the song was written, and learned by Aka, through a non-notated method that relies on how parts fit together rather than on graphic representations. In the new harmony of Figure 5.4, Akablay replaces the A minor chords with C major chords (C dominant 7 chords, to be precise)—a common relative minor to major substitution. The IV and V chords sit in place of the minor version's V chord. The next figure shows what the melody looks like when the bars of the vocal are shifted to bring the guitar square:

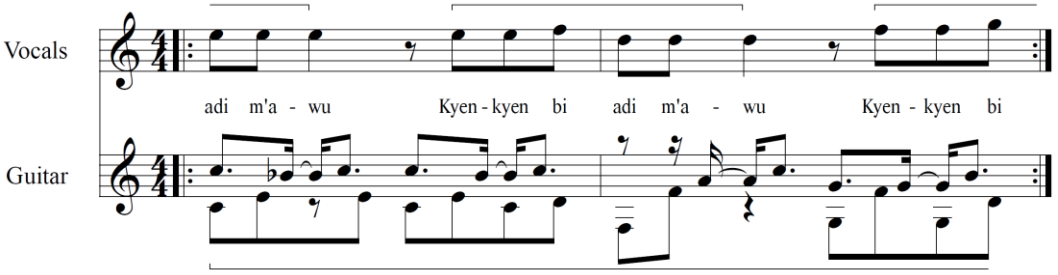


Figure 5.5: Frimpong's "Kyenkyen Bi Adi M'awu" w barring adjusted to the guitar's phrase.

Aka gave me one more example of a minor *Amponsah*, also by Alhaji K. Frimpong. "Hwehwe Mu Na Yi Wo Mpena" was a hit for him in 1977, and like its predecessor both songs are still in the repertoire of many bands gigging in Accra today. "Hwehwe" resembles "Kyewnkyen" in its structure: it begins with a guitar figure that is punctuated by unison chords played by the rest of the band, and then settles into a minor key groove. The chords are Am (v), Gm (iv), Am (iv) again, and Dm (i).

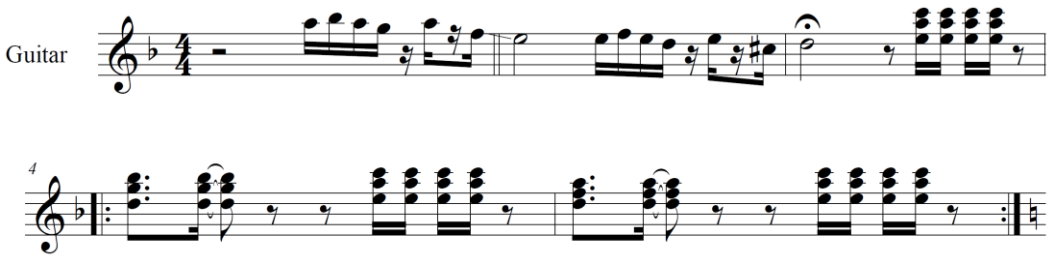


Figure 5.6: Alhaji K. Frimpong's "Hwehwe Mu Na Yi Wo Mpena" as played by Akablay.

Next, I will shift the phrase again to put the tonic on the downbeat of the first measure of the two-beat phrase. All that is required is to swap the order of the two measures:

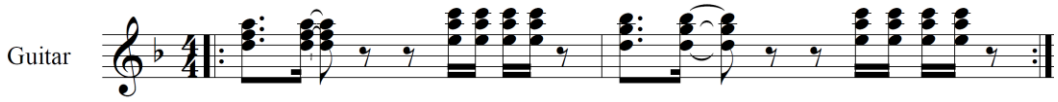


Figure 5.7: Alhaji K. Frimpong's "Hwehwe Mu Na Yi Wo Mpena" w phrase adjusted.

While I am calling the D^{min} chord "i" here (indicating the tonic as a minor) this is not how Aka refers to the chords. Aka's system of thinking about songs

descends from a solfege pedagogy[91]. For him, the three triads never lose sight of their major I chord, which in this song would be F. He refers to Am as iii, Gm as ii, and Dm as iv, and explained the "Hwehwe" harmonic progression to me as "iii ii iii vi." To adapt his statement to my rebarring in Figure 5.7, that would be:

|vi iii |ii iii | *or* **|Dm Am |Gm Am |**

Aka next quickly flipped this progression from the key of Dm/F into the key of Am/C—a convenience as all of our Amponsah examples incline to the key and position of C. This was—I believe—part of his point. Now in the key of C, Aka began to play the "Hwehwe" progression again, but slowly morphs it from the minor key to the major. He begins with:

|vi iii |ii iii | *or* **|Am Em |Dm Em |**

He then proceeds to swap in major chords for their relative minors, and even brings in other palmwine conventions like the A^7 and F^6 chords. He did this repeatedly during the conversation. What follows in one transcription:

[91] My Occidental Brothers collaborator Kofi Cromwell also used a fluent and complex series of solfege syllables to sound out melodies, including the flatted or sharped vowel adjustments. I had never seen anything like it and was quite impressed.

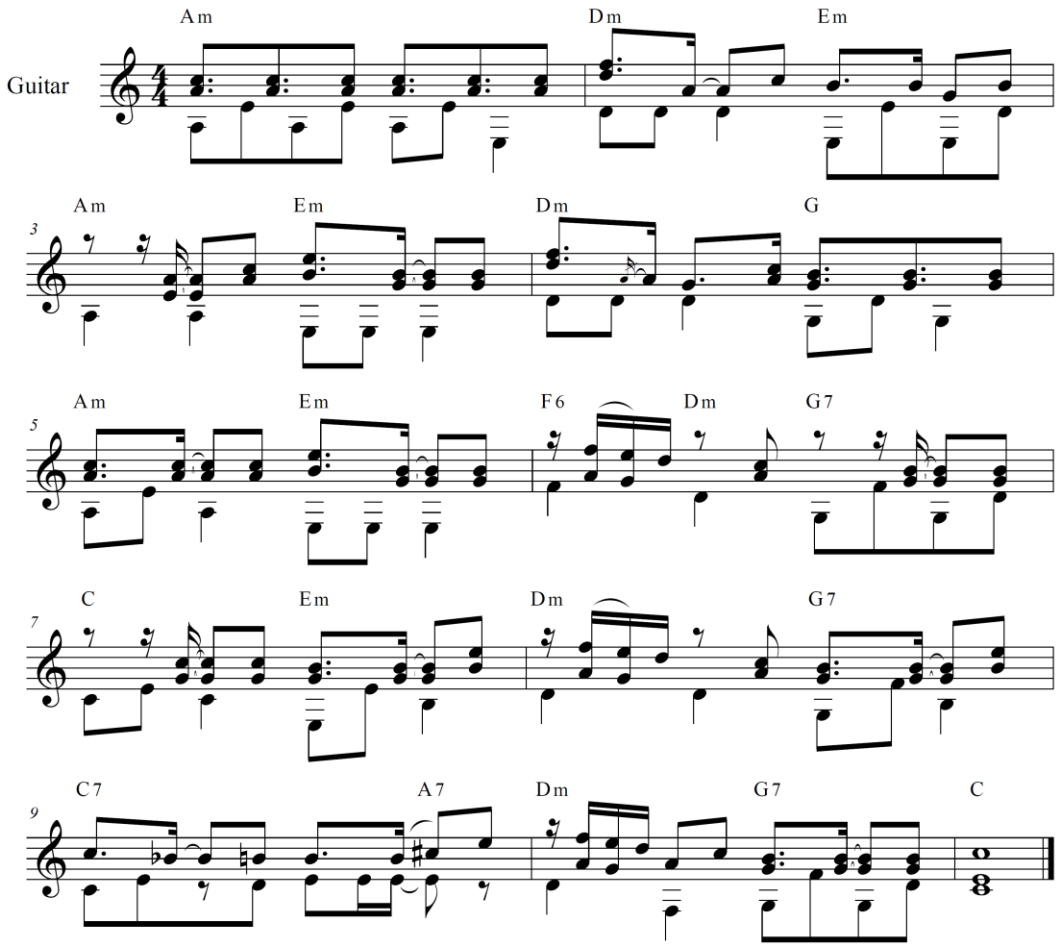


Figure 5.8: Aka transitions "Hwehwe Mu Na Yi Wo Mpena" from minor to major.[92]

I found Aka's examples thrilling. These minor key iterations had never occurred to me, nor had I ever encountered any reference to a minor *Amponsah*. Here Akablay was sliding seamlessly between the minor and major iterations, swapping out the chords effortlessly.

I close with a last example of an atypical *Amponsah* from the bassist Bright Osei. In our conversation, Bright said that the highlife Rhythm *Double G*

[92] I do not include chord names in earlier transcriptions because both the harmonies and their points of change can be ambiguous and fluid. I preferred to let the pitches speak for themselves instead of fencing the harmony.

was another *Amponsah*. I had never considered this, having always thought it to be an entirely different Rhythm. *Double G* is used by Aka, Bright, Smart, and others, but the name was unknown to John Collins. When I described the progression to Prof Collins, he certainly knew it, and said that he had always called it "Highlife in G."

My first reaction to Collins' name was vexation—the term "highlife" typically contains all of this music and all of the Rhythms. After reflection, I came to realize that each of the keys/guitar positions has its own idiom and set of conventions, with *Amponsah*—for example—usually residing in C. While you can play *Amponsah* straight in G, *Double G* can be seen as its own *Amponsah* variation that also incorporates much from *Ɔdɔ Nsan.* It gets its name from the way it moves back and forth between G and its diatonic neighbor, A minor. Importantly, *Double G* resides in and expresses the specificity of the guitar's G position. When Smart Nkansah was telling me about his childhood guitar lessons at church, he told me that his teacher had taught him to play "all the keys."

> Yeah, so we have D, we have A. Because if I say "G," we have the G Double or the G Single. Those are the chords… And then "D" style is what Yamoah used. Yamoah used it as a rhythm called Adowa. But Yamoah, you can use C to play, but Yamoah uses D and the D sound—soulful! So you see that if you are playing the same sequence in C, making a C as a major chord, you won't get the taste! You lose some small taste. You need that to make the music delicious! So Yamoah use D, then we have A, C, D and then E, and then F. The style that they play E, but F, because the F, if this is the neck [he is demonstrating with hands] , the F you have to fly! (S. Nkansah 2019)

I realized what he was talking about: each of the five guitar positions had developed its own set of compositional conventions or devices based upon the idiomatic qualities of this specific instrument and the tonic chords' shape—all unique to guitar music. This Rhythm begins to appear more in the 1960s and 1970s and is not present in palmwine. The basic *Double G* progression is slower than *Amponsah* and stretches the progression over four bars.

|Am G |Am |G D^7 |G G^7 |

Here is my transcription of one of many idiomatic *Double G* variations Aka played for me in 2013:

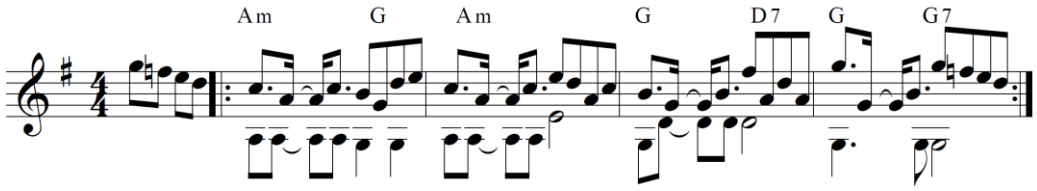


Figure 5.9: Double G variation as played by Akablay in 2013.

If I shift the final bar of my transcription to the beginning of the phrase, we get the following:

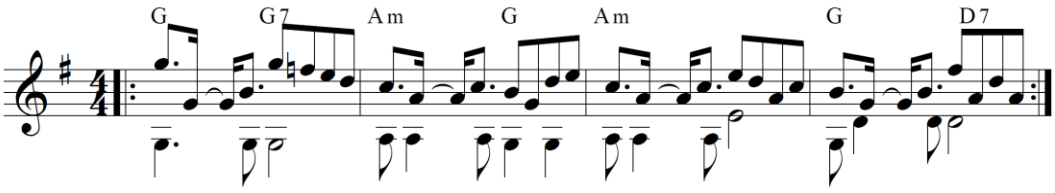


Figure 5.10: Double G with the phrase shifted by one measure.

I will write this again as a chord progression, and abstract the chords to a numerical system:

|G G^7 |Am G |Am |G D^7 | *or* **|I I^7 |iim I |iim |I V^7 |**

Represented in this way, *Double* G presents as an almost-exact match of harmonic progression to the palmwine *Amponsah* described in the subsection Chapter IV: Harmony. I note that IV^6 and iim^7 are enharmonically spelled with the same four pitches.

|C C^7 Dm^7 C^7 |F^6 / C G^7| *or* **|I I^7 iim^7 I^7 |IV^6 / I V^7|**

One puzzle remains: why does *Double G* not sound exactly like an *Amponsah* when there is so much that is the same? I think this can be attributed to four factors: (1) the absence of the iconic "Yaa Amponsah" vocal melody, (2) the slower harmonic rhythm spreads the same chordal progression across twice as much time, (3) the absence of Koo Nimo's iconic theme which does not fit the longer form, and (4) the phrasing of the guitar's melodic figures and sense of a phrasal downbeat anchor the ear differently, which in turn distributes the harmonic weight of the tonic and dominant counterpoint differently within the cycle.

Thus far in this chapter I have presented several songs that disrupt our expectations of what an *Amponsah* song should look like. In many instances I shifted the bar lines of these new examples to reveal the connection. An obvious response would be to challenge the barring of the *Amponsah* cycle as I laid it out in Chapter IV. I acknowledge that the barring of the measures is my own—this music did not develop on paper, but rather in the hands of practicing musicians. I think that this inconsistency of barring may be a result of where my American ear hears the beat, and of how I as a studied outsider utilize the

existing markers, like the timelines of accompanying percussion. However, I also think that overemphasizing the different phrase shapes fails to capture something of the fluidity in the Ghanaian approach, for the most sophisticated Ashanti drummers will, even when well-versed in Western music systems, prefer not to give their American students "a one." Remember what Koo Nimo told me about the shaping of phrases: "I play Amponsah, I come in when I like, and it fits."

Other Voices

Aka told me that "Kyenkyen Bi Adi M'Awu" had been "a *serious hit*" in Nigeria, and it again raised for me the question of the *Amponsah* Rhythm's reach beyond Ghana. When talking about possible other *Amponsah*s, Aka said that it appears in a lot of contemporary Afrobeats.[93] "Afrobeats," Aka says, "These boys, most of them do Yaa Amponsah. They don't even know the name of the Rhythms!" Aka also says it is in the music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti[94], specifically the song "Lady," but I did not explore either of these threads further. Chris Waterman reports that Lagosian bands were playing versions of "Yaa Amponsah" as early as the 1930s (Waterman 1990, 49) [95], and the mid-century

[93] Afrobeats—not be confused with Afrobeat—is an African driven EDM style of the late 2010s that draws heavily upon digital Eurodisco music. The genre was given its name in London and, in my experience, is generally used more in the expatriate and global community than in African cities, though this could be changing.

[94] Fela was well known to love Ghana highlife and to have had a relationship with Ebo Taylor and other Ghanaian musicians that dated to the 1960s. He recorded songs like "It's Highlife Time" and "Palm Wine Sound," though neither is an *Amponsah*—the latter being closer to a *Dagomba* Rhythm.

[95] The Jolly Orchestra from Nigeria recorded it as "Abonsa."

presence of Ghanaian musicians is evident in songs like Rex Lawson's kwaw-style *Ɔdɔ Nsan*, "Jolly Papa." Fela's musicians would certainly have known *Amponsah* and many other Rhythms, though most of his own music discards harmonic progression for modalism.

The eastern Nigerian Igbo musician Victor Uwaifo recorded a famous *Amponsah* with staying power in the late 1960s entitled "Joromi" which was known to all the Ghanaians I interviewed. *Amponsah* is found in the music of at least three guitar giants from that colossus of African music, the Congo—Mwenda Jean Bosco's "Pauline Mubaya," Docteur Nico's "Afrique de l'Ouest," and Franco's Pan-African smash, "Attention Na SIDA," as well as in Tabu Ley's "Monument."

The most provocative example of *Amponsah* has come from Mande musicians. I had first become aware of their different relationship to this music when performing with Malian guitarist Moussa Diakate in 2014. Some years later I had relocated to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and had the opportunity to perform with Balla Kouyate[96]. Balla is a balafon virtuoso born to a griot family in the village of Niagassola[97]. Their family are the custodians of the iconic Sossa Bala —believed to be the eight-hundred-year-old instrument that appears in the epic of King Sundiata Keita. Balla's music is grounded in his family's ancient

[96] I discuss "Mami Wata," Balla, Mamady Kouyate, and Kofi Elektrik at greater length in my paper, "Looking for Yaa Amponsah and Finding Mami Wata" (Braddock 2019)

[97] Balla Kouyate identifies as Malian, but also referred to his home village as Niagassola, which is in far in the northeast of Guinée, very close to Mali. There are members of this jeli family living on both sides of the national border (Charry 2000, 144–45).

tradition, but his work occupies a cosmopolitan space including modern fusion projects such as his work with Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble.

Balla and I were preparing music for a concert when I presented the Ghana Rhythm, he immediately lit up—as had Moussa—digging into an improvisation drawing upon several structural themes that he saw as central to the composition. While he had no knowledge of a connection with Ghana music, a number of hallmarks of *Amponsah* are preserved, notably chord progression, the two melodic motifs, use of the F^6, and the shifting of melodic resolution to before the downbeat—all in the key of C Major. Here is Balla's "Mami Wata" theme:

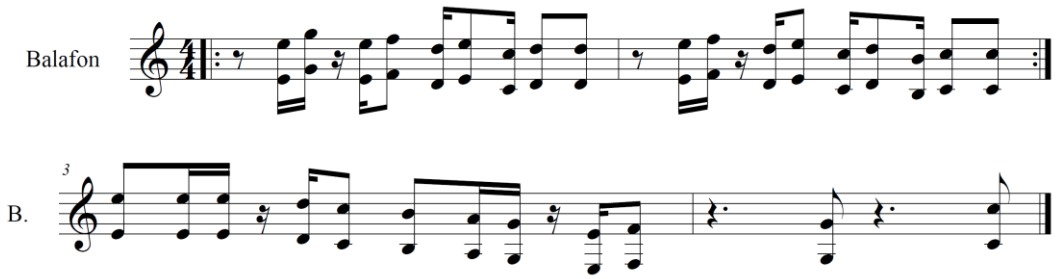


Figure 5.11: "Mami Wata" by Balla Kouyate, 2018.

I asked Balla to explain what he did know about *Amponsah* which he called "Mami Wata." He associates the song with a famous version released in the year of his birth, 1973. He explained:

> I first heard "Mami Wata" from Bembeya Jazz National from Guinée Conakry, because back in the Eighties or even in the early Seventies Bembeya was one of the most popular bands in the West Africa region… Guinée, Mali, Senegal, Ivory Coast, even the Congo—people used to listen to Bembeya a lot. (B. Kouyate 2019)

When I ask him about the meaning of the song's lyrics, he pauses. He knows it is a mythical story about a mermaid named Mami Wata, and Balla thinks that it may be a French term. Mali is landlocked, and he steers the conversation towards river spirits—or *n'man* in Bambara—and to the djeliya song "Mali Sadio" which is about a hippopotamus god and that gives the country its name.

I continued my investigation of "Mami Wata" with the Guinéen guitarist Mamady Kouyate, currently living in New Haven, Connecticut. As with Balla, Mamady was born to a griot family but he chose the guitar as his principle instrument and acted as bandleader or *chef d'orchestre* of the state-sponsored group, Super Tropical Djoli Band de Kouroussa, among others before joining Bembeya Jazz in the early 2000s. When I asked Mamady about "Mami Wata," he began unfolding a tale of his family and their long history playing music in the Kouroussa prefecture[98] in the Guinéen interior. His father, Mamy Kouyate, was a leading kora player in the region. In the 1940s he was brought to Paris to perform, and he returned from his journey with a new instrument: an acoustic guitar.

> My father is the first person who bring guitar on to my village—he play guitar and the kora… Now my father have lotta lotta *personnes*, lotta griot people come to learn the guitar with my daddy. You know one song like "Tubaka"—that's my father…

[98] Prefectures are the administrative regions of modern Guinée, akin to the US system of states.

création. Now, this Mami Wata song, the first name of this song is "*Minuit*"… (M. Kouyate 2019)[99]

Guitar had a coastal presence in Africa since the Kru had adopted it two to three hundred years earlier, but Kouyate's father—as Mamady tells it—was the first to bring it to the Guinéen interior[100]. He was also possibly that first person, to set traditional Guinéen kora music onto the instrument. He also began composing original music on the guitar—notably 1946's *Minuit*[101], the French word for "midnight." Mamady played me his father's song:

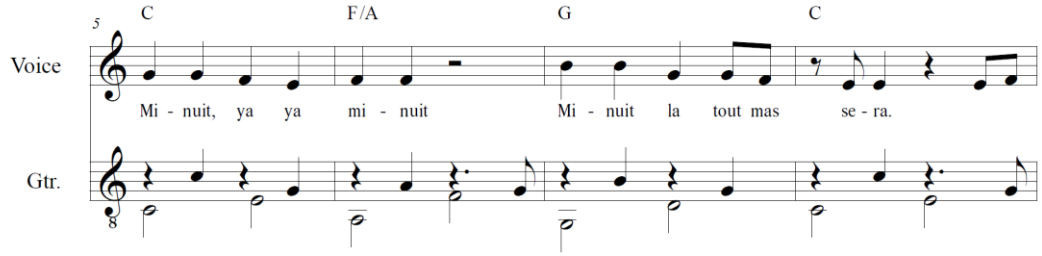


Figure 5.12: "Minuit" performed by Mamady Kouyate, 2019.

Mamady tells me that *Minuit* is the source song for Bembeya's *Mami Wata*. Specifically, he tells me that the lyric of "Minuit" are about Mami Wata, the "one lady *diable* [Devil]… a devil *invisible*! This lady between Sierra Leone and Guinée like the same country in Mandingo, but not the same country with

[99] I spoke to Mamady Kouyate in a mixture of English and French, with many words in his Mandingo mother tongue. Words in French are presented here as spoken and italicized. I provide translations as I think necessary.

[100] There is evidence of other guitars being used further in from the coast, but this is Kouyate's understanding as it pertains to his region.

[101] Research into this song's trajectory in Guinée is hampered by the existence of other "Minuit" compositions: a romantic song performed by Bembeya Jazz in the 1960s and another frequently performed by traditional musicians in the early nationalist era that is based upon a poem by Fodeba Keita. Both Keita's and Mamy Kouyate's songs have prominence in the repertoire and the cultural identity of the post-colonial republic. Further research on the roots and authorship of "Minuit" is necessary, but out of scope of this thesis.

the *colonisation*… This lady come out midnight… She's Mami from water, in the *Océan Atlantique*."[102]

Beginning in the 1960s, musicians from modern groups like Bembeya Jazz were turning to traditional musicians not just for culturally referential approaches to their modern instruments[103] but for folkloric songs to arrange as modern songs. Mamady told me about his friend Aboubacar Demba Camara, singer for Bembeya Jazz: "'Balake', he take this from one ngoni player… He take that in Koumana—that's twenty-five mile from Kouroussa… You come to the home village, the song you see over there you take like document, you go put on the modern group." Demba was older than Mamady but also from Kouroussa, and fond of his young friend. Mamady shared a riveting story about the origin of the "Mami Wata" song that captures a moment of cultural exchange between African peoples. One night, the two young men went to collect some traditional clothing from a tailor in Kouroussa:

> This tailor, he do the Sierra Leone before. *Il est*, he from Kouroussa, he go to Sierra Leone… Now this tailor know some *parole* [Fr "Speech"], English *parole*, or *Créole* [Creole, mixed language] English-*Créole parole*. *Voilà*! He mix the two from over

[102] Mamady shared with me his own story of meeting Mami Wata: "Me, I see Mami Wata one time, in 1952… 1982! In Conakry, Camayenne [district of the city]. I see. Because sometime I like to take my guitar *acoustique*, *et* you know Guinée is very, very hot place. Nighttime: you hot, you have *moustiques* [mosquitos]… Bon. For take a good air, I take my acoustic guitar, midnight, I go to *le plage* [beach]… The time I back home I see one lady coming. Very nice lady. She tell me, "You can come this place tomorrow, this time?" I say yes. She say, "Bon. Come see me. This time, this place." On the streets! But, after midnight, I tell somebody, accompany me to one place, I have one *rendez-vous* with one lady. But I come with my friend, I see the lady come, I say to my friend "it's this lady"—sssss! [gestures that she disappears]—I don't see her no more! [big laughter]" 2019

[103] Bembeya Jazz's *Armée Guinéenne* is often pointed to as an example of balafon technique set on electric guitar.

> there. Now me, I come with Demba. The guy, the tailor tell me to play "Minuit." I play like: [plays father's guitar arrangement of Minuit]. This tailor sing "Mami Wata!" [sings] "Mami Wata, Mami Wata… Mami Wata, Mami Wata…" Mami Wata is an English language! Make *mélange* [mixture]. Now Demba… go early in the house, he take Nagra[104], he come tell the tailor to SING this for him. Me, I play that: [plays father's Minuit again]. *Bon*! Demba go and *enseign* [teach] everything the guy tell. The guy, because he talk sometime English, sometime Creole.

In this story, Mamady recounts how hearing him play "Minuit" provoked the tailor to sing a lyric he learned in the Anglophone country of Sierra Leone—a lyric that is a mixture of Creole, English, and Mandingo languages. Both his and the "Minuit" lyrics speak of Mami Wata, the mermaid spirit, and they both fit over the same chord progression. Demba records the tailor's hybrid performance and takes it to his bandmates to arrange for Bembeya Jazz, releasing the song in 1973—the version of the song that Balla Kouyate references as the original. Mamady plays Bembeya's arrangement for me:

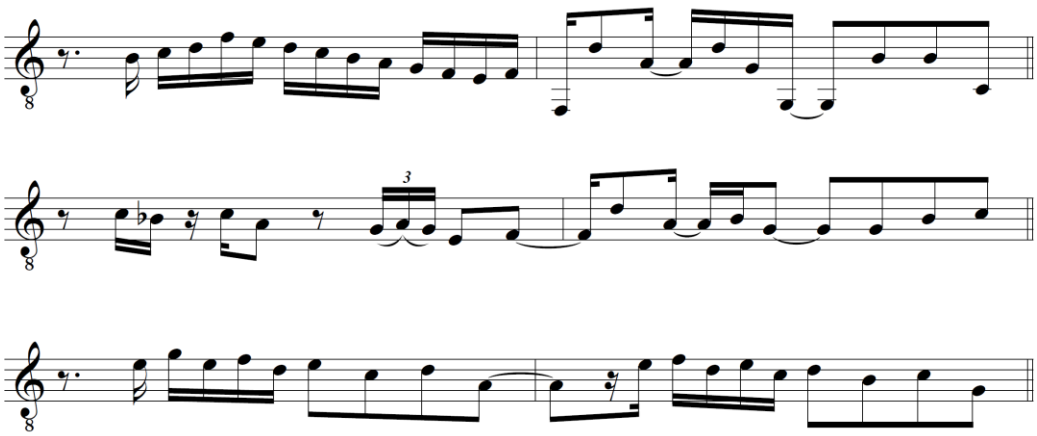


Figure 5.13: "Mami Wata" arranged by Bembeya Jazz, as played by Mamady Kouyate, 2019.

[104] Reel-to-reel tape recorder.

This version has distinct signatures of *Amponsah* that are not in "Minuit": the use of the flatted seventh in the tonic chord, the shifting of chord resolution ahead of the beat at the end of all measures, F^6 voicing in measure five, the two part call and response melody in measures five and six which also is heard in the vocals of the Bembeya recording, and it is in the key of C. It seems clear that Bembeya's leader, guitarist, and arranger, Sekou "Diamond-fingers" Diabate, must have had some additional knowledge of *Amponsah* either as a highlife or palmwine song, though with so many variations of *Amponsah*, I am unsure of the exact source. How else could all of these core compositional elements have been introduced in Bembeya's Minuit/Mami Wata mélange?

Was *Amponsah* a common Rhythm in Sierra Leone, perhaps with a different name? Was the tailor's song originally Sierra Leonean, and could I find it? Africa's earliest guitarists were the Kru people from the Liberia/Sierra Leone coast, and Ghanaian guitarists Koo Nimo, John Collins, and Akablay all think of the Kru as the forebearers of palmwine music. But Sierra Leone was, like the Gold Coast, Anglophone and an English colony. Did *Amponsah* travel to Sierra Leone with Ghanaian musicians or in recordings? When I spoke with Ashade Pearce of the Sierra Leone Refugee All-Stars, he knew of no Sierra Leonean "Mami Wata" song. Nevertheless, songs like the Refugee All-Stars' "Soda Soap" closely resemble the *Amponsah* Rhythm.

Mamady is emphatic about the genesis of *Mami Wata*. He still plays "Mami Wata," but in the spirit of the prefecture orchestres of his youth, he goes

deeper into Guinéen music for his personal arrangement. He tells me, "If me, I play Mami Wata, I don't play the highlife, I play the balafon (M. Kouyate 2019)," and plays on his guitar a blistering run of sixteenth notes in the style of the balafon player that simultaneously utilizes the melodic and harmonic components of an *Amponsah*:

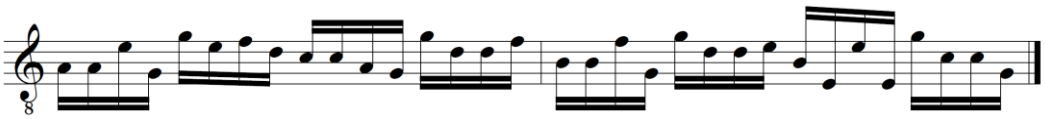


Figure 5.14: "Mami Wata" in balafon style performed by Mamady Kouyate, 2019.

Mami Wata in Ghana

At some point in the last few years I started making a list of recordings of *Amponsah* songs and making a playlist of those that are available on the Spotify streaming service. The Spotify list alone is still about a hundred tracks long—and I have not even tried to be thorough yet. The music comes from all over, and it is always interesting to play the list—particularly the tracks that are from other parts of Africa—for people with a personal tie to the Rhythm. Ghanaians recognize *Amponsah* immediately but are surprised when the singing arrives in another tongue. Samuel Asare has been Koo Nimo's engineer and assistant for many years and has developed a good ear for identifying whether a track is from Ghana or not by listening to the guitarist's technique. Aka listens with a guitar in his hands, playing along to show Amponsah and predicting with accuracy the specific melodies of Bembeya Jazz's "Mami Wata" and other more esoteric versions like Hugh Masekela's: "The two-bar—you can't hide it! You *can not* hide

it!" With the exception of the Nigerian tracks, most of the non-Ghanaian recordings are unknown to the Ghanaians, with "Spirit Voices" being a definite exception. Even the Kumasi Trio's original recording of "Amponsah - Part 1" was not immediately recognized, even though so much sprung from that distant recording session.

I searched for some connection between "Mami Wata," "Minuit," and "Yaa Amponsah." The spiritual figure of Mami Wata is known across West Africa and the Caribbean. To some she is a devil, and to others she represents a pre-Christian African spirituality. Attah Poku expressed a neutral view of her, allowing that to some her worship is good:

> We have people under the water, under the ocean. People in Africa consider Mami Wata as the head of people who live under the ocean. Mami is mother… People go stand at the sea at the nighttime so they can talk to Mami Wata. So Mami Wata is a kind of spiritual lady who lives under the water… People who believe in Jesus Christ think that the person is a devil—no Christian person would go to get advice from her. And then the spiritual people think, ok, she's the right person, they always go there. (Poku 2019)

Koo discussed how many people attributed the death of two young lovers near the mouth of the Volta River to her. George Spratz—before I had raised the issue—recounted his encounter with Mami Wata in the epiphanic vision when Christ took him through Hell and the Heavens. He saw Mami Wata, or the

"Queen of the Coast." George explains that she is one of the beasts discussed in the New Testament[105].

When I asked Ghanaians about Mami Wata songs, they brought up a famous song by the Nigerian, Victor Uwaifo—but not the *Amponsah* "Joromi" (which they also knew). It is Uwaifo's 1966 "Guitar Boy," also known as "Guitar Boy and Mamywater"[106]. In the lyric, Uwaifo details an evening encounter with the ocean spirit as he played guitar on the beach[107].

In my search I found another "Mami Wata" song, performed by an aged Kwaa Mensah, the nephew of the Kumasi Trio's Kwame Asare. More exciting still, this song is an *Amponsah*, and Mensah plays an arrangement similar to that in Figure 4.16—his example of Kwame Asare/Jacob Sam's style. This was the first connection of Mami Wata to *Amponsah* other than the Bembeya recording

[105] George told me the following about Mami Wata: "She is responsible for the fashion we see on planet these days. The new dresses you wear, every day: the make-ups, the perfumes. Everything that attracts--she is responsible for that. But what I can tell you about a little, you see, if you recall, I don't know if you are a student of the Bible, or you know the Bible a little, we know about one third of the angels fell to Lucifer. And then each of them were occupied portions or parts of this planet which have their characteristics. So if someone was on a mountain in Heaven, he occupy the mountains. And Mami Wata occupies the seas because of his [sic] water nature, but he is not in the sea. But his world is within the sea." Spratz told me that the Biblical passage dealing with Mami Wata, or the "Queen of the Coast" is Revelation 13.1. The passage is: "And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy." ("Book of Revelation, King James Bible" 2019)

[106] Gerhard Kubik connects Uwaifo's encounter song to the African-American narrative of the crossroads seen in blues music (Kubik 1999, 24–25).

[107] This tale is strikingly similar to the one told by Mamady Kouyate. One could reach to think that the Uwaifo song is the inspiration for Kouyate's story, but I do not think this is the case. Rather, I believe that many folkloric encounters with Mami Wata resemble the two stories. That both involve guitars can likely be attributed to the fact that it is musicians who are writing these songs and that they place themselves at their center. Uwaifo frames his story as an actual event, also.

that I'd found. Mensah's recording is much later, though—released in 2003—however John Collins' liner notes describes the song as an "old Liberian/Ghanaian highlife in Pidgin English" (2003), and lyrically appears to be a coastal sailor's song. Mensah sings:

> And I die tomorrow, and I die tomorrow,
> And I die tomorrow, Mami Wata go bury me.
>
> Any day, any time
> Any time, any day, Mami Wata go bury me.
>
> I am a sea-boy, I am a sea-boy
> I am a sea-boy, voyage is my home.
>
> Voyage is my home, voyage is my home
> Voyage is my home, Mami Wata go bury me.

This song was not known to any my Ghanaian friends other than John Collins, who had recorded it, and he did not know much more about its origins. When I played it for them, they all said that the song was by Kwaa Mensah—because he was singing it. While I had no evidence that this song predated Mensah, in this moment I realized that my understanding of authorship and ownership was different from the Ghanaians I was asking. Mensah was performing the song, and he had recorded it—it was his. They were not as concerned as I was with an older history of this "Mami Wata." It simply existed, and was available to be used.

In Bembeya Jazz's recording "Mami Wata," the vocals are not the same as Mensah's, but incredibly you can clearly hear Demba and the other vocalists phonating the "Yaa Amponsah" refrain with the same vocal sounds, pitches, and

rhythm as Figure 4.4. When played for Ghanaians, they laugh. "They are trying to sing the Twi," Samuel Asare noted—but they do not know the language. Mamady Kouyate had told me that for the Bembeya version Demba and the group had tried to bring in languages from all over Guinée—this was part of its success, he said. Everyone could hear themselves in the song. In fact, some of the vocal which Kouyate took to be a Guinéan language unknown to him was in fact an artifact of the Ghanaian Fante/Twi lyric.

Spirit Voices, and Issues of Ownership for the Global Age

I first met Loveliest Addison while on tour with the Occidental Brothers. Expatriate Ghanaian musicians all seem to know each other and stay in close touch, so in each new town we visited I was meeting new groups of these old friends. In 2009 I was staying with Rambo in Harlem at an apartment that had been owned by the Ghanaian singer Joe Mensah since the 1970s, and I would realize that this flat was the setting for much of what Addison would later tell me about his relationships with Vincent Nguini, Hugh Masekela, and Paul Simon.

In the 1970s, Addison had been the kit drummer for Ghana's Sweet Beans Band[108] and performed under the name "Kofi Elektrik."[109] Kofi is a Fante musician born in the village of Saltpond—the same as Kwame Asare and Ebo

[108] The group was fronted by Pat Thomas, a Ghanaian singer who assumed an Anglo name. The Sweet Beans Band were funded by the Ghana Cocoa Board, a trade group that looks after this most important national agricultural product.
[109] Most Ghanaians have a Christian name, "Loveliest" in this case, as well as a name they are given for the day of the week on which they were born (Kofi). Elektrik is a taken stage name.

Taylor—on Ghana's central coast. He had immigrated to the States in 1977 and was presently living Vineland, New Jersey. Kofi had befriended Hugh Masekela in Accra in the early 1970s[110]. In the late 1980s, Masekela had been on tour supporting the American singer Paul Simon on his *Graceland*[111] tour. He called Kofi from Europe to announce that his friend Paul would be contacting him soon and that he was looking for West African guitarists for his next project[112]—the sessions that would produce 1990s *The Rhythm of the Saints*. Kofi recommended many players living in New York from Nigeria and other countries, but after some months Simon contacted him again, unsatisfied with the players who had come to the studio. Kofi explains:

> So Paul called me, said Hugh has told him that I play guitar when he comes to my house. I say, "yeah, for fun." Said "Come." So, I went to the studio… I came up with three tunes. So, I went there and I play the three tunes and he said that he like two. Then I was playing Yaa Amponsah myself sitting down there and he said, "What about this?" I said, "Ah, it's a Ghana folk music." He said, "Lay it down." So, I played! (Addison 2019a)[113]

This is how the drummer from the village of Saltpond found himself playing guitar for a major American pop star. His *Amponsah* is in the idiomatic C position, though he places a capo at the guitar's seventh fret producing the concert key of G. My transcription presents the song in the key of C, which is

[110] The trumpeter had come to collaborate with the Ghanaian band Hedzoleh Sounds
[111] The 1986 album *Graceland* was Simon's collaboration with South African musicians and has sold over sixteen million copies.
[112] Jay Pillay reports that he and his fellow ethnomusicology students saw Simon in the front row at the 1988 Koo Nimo concert in New York City which I discuss in footnote 3. He recalls that he and "Andy" Kaye joked that Simon was planning his new album as he watched Koo play (Pillay 2020). Little did they know how this prophesy would manifest.
[113] A photo of Addison Simon from the recording session can be found in Appendix IV.

how the guitarist is thinking, and includes most of the compositional components discussed in Chapter IV.

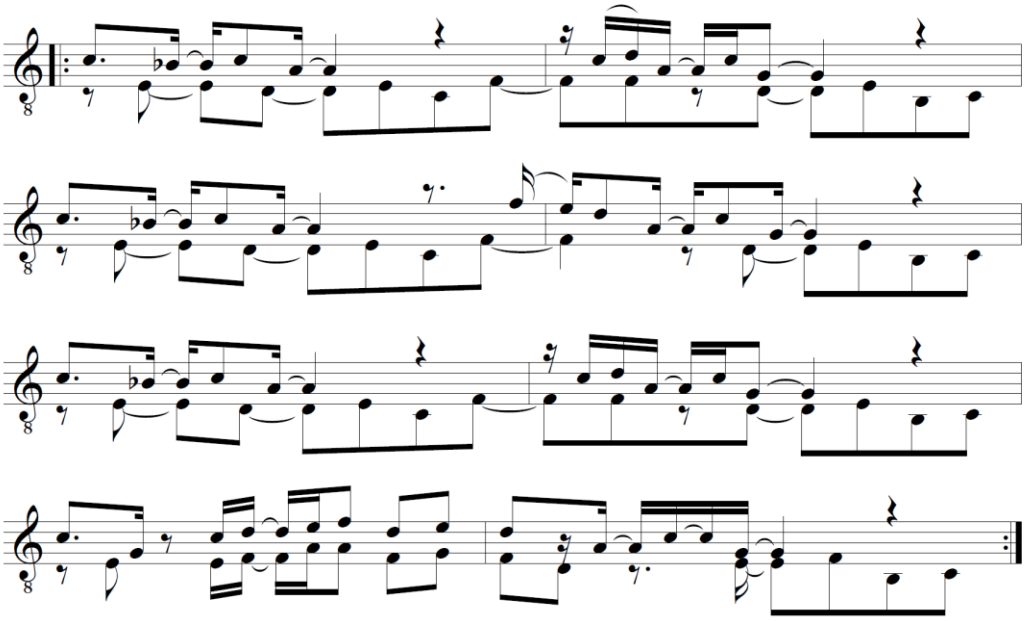


Figure 5.15: "Spirit Voices" as performed by Kofi Elektrik, 1990.[114]

Kofi utilized a second palmwine Rhythm, *Dagomba*, as a bridge on the same track, further connecting this session to the earliest Ghana guitar music. Simon set his own vocals on to the *Amponsah* and entitled it "Spirit Voices"[115]. One of the other songs Kofi composed became the title cut "The Rhythm of the Saints," which an educated listener would immediately identify as a *Kwaw* style sikyi highlife—uniquely Ghanaian. At this point in the recording session, Kofi's friend Vincent Nguini arrived in New York and took over the guitar duties for

[114] A puzzling transcription for "Spirit Voices" appears in an interview with John Collins by Cynthia Schmidt that presents Addison's guitar playing as if played two guitars (Schmidt 1994, 143)—not at all how it was actually or ever would be played. Collins has no idea why this transcription was included, and we had a good laugh at how wrong it was. The transcription is not Schmidt's or Collins'.

[115] I contacted Simon twice requesting an interview, which he declined.

Simon, and would remain a member of the Simon band until his death in 2017. Nguini is a Cameroonian guitarist that had played for years with Manu Dibango.

I asked Kofi about his payment for the sessions. He did not share a specific amount, but said that he still has the contract and that it was "one big payment… At that time, it seemed good. I didn't care. Because I was out of music for almost fifteen years before he came into my life. So it was something like I was doing for fun. I didn't even care about the money too much." He and Vincent Nguini remained close, and he even stays in semi-regular contact with Simon, last seeing each other at Nguini's funeral in 2017. Our conversation stirred more emotion when it turned to the album credits. He told me:

> Yes. My name is on the album as a composer. "Rhythm of the Saint" as a guitarist and a composer of "The Rhythm of the Saint." But the other one was just guitar. Even the Yaa Amponsah they made a mistake—they wrote Vincent name on for the Yaa Amponsah. They made a mistake in the writing—I don't know who did it. Because after I finish, I gave Vincent to him, I was away.

The album's liner notes do not credit Addison for his arrangement or performance on the *Amponsah* track[116], just as he said. It reads "All Words And

[116] There is some dispute about who is the guitarist on this recording. Addison insists it was he, as is believed by Akablay and many others. Asante Okyerema told me it was Vincent, but then called later and said it was Kofi after the two of them spoke again. Collins and Koo Nimo both thought it was Nguini but referred to the liner notes as their source. Koo's assistant Samuel Asare insists it is not a Ghanaian, though Nguini did pass some time living and playing in Accra: "From my point of view I would say it's not Ghanaian because it's lacking something. Critical listen. It's lacking something, which is not Ghanaian. If it is Ghanaian, even if the person cannot play very good guitar, unless those stuff would definitely come in. You know what I mean?"

My emerging theory is that Addison laid down the foundational track—this is supported by Simon's request to come with him to the Ghana Embassy—but that possibly a replacement guitar part was laid later by Nguini. Just as likely, however, the session notes were inaccurate, substituting the new guitarist's name for the original player, Nguini for Addison.

Music by Paul Simon, except Spirit Voices, Portuguese lyrics by Milton Nacimento"(Simon 1990). Further on it credits Vincent for a guitar arrangement, "based on a traditional Ghanaian song 'Yaa Amponsah' by Jacob Sam." In a series of text messages that I received from Kofi in late April of 2019, he writes of being uncredited: "Many people, have used my materials without giving me credit or money, because I wasn't active in music that time. So I didn't care much. Now that I free I won't let it happen again" (Addison 2019b). He concludes with, "So sad." Indeed, for while we have seen that the Amponsah/Mami Wata song has travelled extensively throughout West Africa, it is Addison who is responsible for its greatest commercial success.

While Addison was not credited for his foundational work on this well-known Simon track, a larger issue of accreditation remained. Simon knew from what Kofi had told him that this song was considered to be from the Ghanaian folkloric tradition. Kofi told me about what happened next:

> So after I laid out, me and Asante—the drummer—Paul has called me that he wants us to go to Ghana Mission—Ghana Consulate. So me, Asante, and Paul's manager, and Paul himself went to Ghana consulate in New York… We went to Ghana Mission and Paul donate some few dollars to Ghana culture in New York… because I told him I say Ghana folk music, and he wanted to divert some money to Ghana culture.

The drummer in this story is Asante Okyerema, and when we spoke in October of 2019, he confirmed Addison's story. Reports vary, but Boatema Boateng reports Simon's payment to the Copyright Association of Ghana as 16,000USD (Boateng 2011, 97), and Koo Nimo reports 38,000USD (Edmonds

2016, 98). It appears that following the success and scrutiny of the *Graceland* album, Simon wanted to get ahead of any potential charges of mishandling African musicians or African folkloric material—and rightly so. It is at this point that the story returns to Ghana.

Koo Nimo was president of the Ghana musicians' union at this time and told me that the government used these *Amponsah* funds from Simon to found its National Folklore Board whose charter was to protect Ghanaian folkloric cultural products. Specifically, the NFB was one of the first nations of the developing world to encode its music, iconography, sculpture, and textile as the intellectual property within the jurisdiction of international commercial law. Koo Nimo and John Collins were inaugural members of the board in the 1990s but have long since moved on. The offices of Ghana's National Folklore Board abut the W.E.B. Du Bois Centre for Pan African Culture[117] in the Cantonments district of Accra. The acting president of the NFB is Nana Asante, a young attorney from Kumasi, and while she did not allow me to record the interview, she said I was welcome to take written notes of her comments.

Nana Asante told me that the board seeks to protect two things: "traditional cultural expressions" such as an actual song (she mentioned two

[117] Du Bois moved to Ghana in 1961 where he lived out his final days working on the Encyclopedia Africana project and it seems fitting that the great African American should be interred so close to this organization at the vanguard of protecting African cultural products. While this was unfinished in his life, it inspired Henry Louis Gates and Anthony Appiah to complete a similar project in 1999.

children's songs "Tutu Gbɔvi" and "Sansa Kroma") and kente cloth patterns[118], and "traditional knowledge" such as traditional skills and manufacture methods including herbal medicine. Personal ownership claims—such as that which could be claimed by the family of Jacob Sam/Kwame Asare—revert to national property after seventy years. This is not the same thing as entering into the public domain in the US, because Ghanaians must now petition for the use of these folkloric materials. This has led to a great deal of frustration among Ghanaian musicians who operate under the principle of sankofa which connects contemporary culture work with traditional practice. The Ghana musicians I interviewed choose to ignore this NFB purview. As Koo Nimo told me:

> There was a clause which John [Collins] and I didn't agree with. That even Ghanaians who wanted to record traditional airs must get permission. For example, I recorded "Adampa." "Adampa" was a traditional air, floating there—a traditional tune. So, I recorded it! [i.e. he did not petition the NFB for permission]

The NFB is more active in seeking remuneration for the production of kente cloth patterns, and at the time of our meeting was seeking compensation for kente use from the producers of the American movie *Black Panther* (2018).

Final Measures

I asked the NFB president how you could identify a piece of music like "Yaa Amponsah," given all of its variations. She is not herself a musician and said that this was the very reason they have a board of experts. It is my goal in

[118] Boatema Boateng's book, *The Copyright Thing Doesn't Work Here*, deals most specifically with cloth manufacture in Ghana.

Chapter IV to offer a set of defining characteristics that let us identify the song in its many interpretations and uses. My examples of Chapter V bring a greater complexity to the project of identification by analyzing drastically different and varied presentations of the Rhythm. And what of the NFB's purview? I would suggest that the song "Yaa Amponsah" falls under the category of "traditional cultural expression," and that the Rhythm *Amponsah* falls under the category of "traditional knowledge." But can one copyright these elements, not all of which need be present for a performance to be an *Amponsah*?

And can we even say that it originates in Ghana? The musicians of Mali and Guinée think of it as a different song with a different heritage, and with a different point of origin. Many of the paths of transmission and exchange can—at most—be postulated. Mamady's story of the tailor is incredible and compelling, but it leaves open as many questions as it answers. Who holds the ownership of Amponsah/Mami Wata/Minuit—Guinée, Ghana, Sierra Leone? "Mami Wata" is probably the most widely known of the names. In Mali, "Minuit" seems to be the name that is more commonly used, and "Yaa Amponsah" in Ghana and Nigeria. "Amponsah - Part 1" is the earliest recording, and the earliest iteration that coalesces the different elements.

My guess is that Kwaa Mensah's "Mami Wata" was a very old song from the days of sea travel, and that if there was an original guitar accompaniment it would have been what the Ghanaians call *Mainline*—similar to, but older than *Amponsah*, with a similar harmony but without the *Amponsah* melody, guitar

accompaniment, or rhythms. Notably, Mensah's melody resembles the 1927 recordings by the Ghanaian George Williams Aingo of the *Mainline* style song, "Suantsi"[119] and an a Capella 12/8 song "Mi Agur Bi." We can also hear the melody in an *Amponsah* recorded in the early 1960s by the Nigerian Cardinal Rex Lawson entitled "Mekine Wo Bo Te."[120] The source song could likely have come with the Kru sailors, and the Fante musician Mensah was old enough to have possibly learned it from the Kru along the coast as a boy. The other Ghana guitarists did not know the song, including Koo Nimo who was raised in Ashanti country away from the coast. At some point, the songs mixed, and musicians brought the Mami Wata lyric inside the *Amponsah* Rhythm. Presumably this is what the tailor performed for Demba and Mamady in Kouroussa, because the Bembeya Jazz recording has elements of both of the "Yaa Amponsah" and "Mami Wata" vocal lines, as well as the rhythmic and melodic conventions of the *Amponsah* guitar accompaniment.

The challenge of dating this combination of musical and lyrical elements is great, but we have one clue that predates Bembeya by almost twenty years. The Trinidadian calypsonian, Lord Kitchener, released a 78rpm record in approximately 1955[121]. Melodisc 1335 had the song "Professor Kitchener" on its A-side, backed with "Mamie Water." Kitchener was born Aldwyn Roberts and

[119] *Roots of Highlife 1927*. Heritage. 1992.
[120] *Rex Lawson's Greatest Hits*. Flame Tree. n.d.
[121] I am guessing that the disk came out in 1955 based upon the known dates and catalog numbers of other Melodisc releases.

was one of many who migrated from the West Indies to England in the early 1950s, when the cities of London, Manchester, and Liverpool grew small but vibrant communities of musicians from the Caribbean and West Africa (Ainley 2008)[122]. Their eyes were turned toward Africa, certainly, and Kitchener released songs such as "Africa Is My Home," "Kitch in the Jungle," and 1957's "Birth of Ghana" which celebrates President Kwame Nkrumah and the country's new independence from Britain.

Kitchener's "Mamie Water" is a standard calypso of the era, with a longer, jazz-influenced chord progression than we hear in palmwine music but which is not far different from the big band highlife of the era. In fact, E.T. Mensah and other Ghanaian groups included many calypsos in their sets, too. The Melodisc recording begins with this horn arrangement:

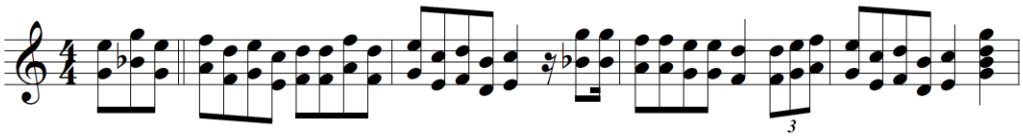


Figure 5.16: Horn arrangement from "Mamie Water" by Lord Kitchener.

This melody, specifically the first half, is iconic *Amponsah*, and we see it in Figure 4.7, though here it sits differently in the measure, and note that I have transposed from the original key of A♭. The records center label credits A. Roberts (Kitchener) as composer, but the lyrics are familiar to us. Kitchener takes the melody and lyric for his refrain from the same source used by Kwaa Mensah.

[122] This moment is well-documented in Honest John's *London Is the Place For Me* series.

O, what a life! I am alone without a wife
As far as I can see, Mamie Water go bury me

If I die tomorrow, if I die tomorrow,
If I die tomorrow, Mamie Water go bury me.

I was courting in Sierra Leone, and my lady friend let me down
That is why the Lord Kitchener is going to live with Mamie Water.

If I die tomorrow, if I die tomorrow,
If I die tomorrow, Mamie Water go bury me.

I was sit in the rocking chair, scrutinizing her lovely hair
I will kiss her and without fail I'm going to play with her fishy tail

If I die tomorrow, if I die tomorrow,
If I die tomorrow, Mamie Water go bury me.

I will take her to Kumasi, and the city of [uncertain]
In the loveliest motor car, it will be me and Mamie Water

If I die tomorrow, if I die tomorrow,
If I die tomorrow, Mamie Water go bury me.[123]

Kitchener makes reference to both Ghana (Kumasi) and Sierra Leone.

Though we can assume that he had not visited Africa at this point, he was surrounded in London with musicians from both Ghana and Sierra Leone, as well as Nigeria—all British colonies. He likely learned the song from one or more of them. John Collins told me that Kitchener did come to Ghana for the 1957 independence celebration and I am guessing that there were many performances of "Birth of Ghana" on that trip. But his "Mamie Water" precedes the trip by two years. Even without knowing Kitchener's source for the song, this recording is an incredible display of Black Atlanticism and the earliest document

[123] The complete lyric is included in Appendix I.

we have that combines musical elements from *Amponsah* and lyrical components of "Mami Wata."

Yaa Amponsah/Amponsah/Minuit/Mami Wata in all of its presentations illustrates a narrative of transmission, traditionalism, modernization, and hybridization that connects African cultures across the continent and the diaspora. In Chapter II, I examined the threads of the songs origins in palmwine music and the music that preceded it, setting it in its historical context within the region and comparing its creation myths. In Chapter III, I discussed the process of transmission for Ghanaian guitarists, and how this and other idiomatically Ghanaian styles became imbedded within a variety of performance contexts, notably Christian churches. In Chapter IV I offer a first analysis and categorization of the iconic and idiomatic themes of the Ghanaian "Yaa Amponsah" song and *Amponsah* Rhythm. While the Rhythm is singularly important to Ghana's contemporary musicians, it has previously eluded definitions despite being the artwork upon which the country's National Folklore Board is founded—itself at the center of the global intellectual property debate. In Chapter V, I presented further extensions of the Rhythm in Ghana that disrupt our immediate expectations, and manifestations of the Rhythm in other countries' repertoires—notably "Mami Wata"—that tantalize our imagining of this cultural product's circulation in Africa, the Americas, and in Europe.

So much of the history of this piece of music—or of this musical method, or style—Is about synthesis and hybridization, about transmission and

adaptation. From the adoption of the guitar into an ancient tradition of West African song and of string music, from the adaptation of ideas of harmony from European church into the popular music of the colonized, from the superimposition of ballroom dance upon black bodies, from the creation of an African goddess from the mermaid of the European sailors, and from the continuing refashioning of a song across generations that is at once confoundingly complex and immediately recognizable—*Amponsah* weaves narrative lines that approach, sometimes intersect, and disperse again. The balafon master Balla Kouyate reflected on this long history of cultural exchange:

> It's hard to say that this is a Ghana music, or this is a Mali music, or this is a Guinée music, because they all used to be one, before people started moving around, before the Europeans came, before the British came. They all used to be one. So, that's why I'm saying it might be Ghana music, it might be Guinée music… It's all been trading stuff: culture, you know, anything. So that's why for me it's just hard to say if this is Ghana music or Guinée music… You know what I mean?

APPENDIX I: Lyric Transcriptions

I commissioned the following two transcriptions and interpretations of the Kumasi Trio "Amponsah" recordings from Fante. It is my understanding that the lyrics for the original "Yaa Amponsah" recordings have not appeared in print before.

"Amponsah - Part 1"

Written by: Jacob Sam/Kwame Asare.
Performed by: the Kumasi Trio
Translation and interpretation from Fante by: Andrew Mensah
Assisted by: Elana Cohen-Khani

Original Fante Lyric

Abena Amponsa megyae aware, megyae aware
Odo Yɛwu Amponsa megyae aware
Odo Yɛwu Amponsa megyae aware

Wɔnuanom dze muoko abasram, w'egyanom dzidzi m'atam
Yaa Amponsa megyae aware

Oyɛ ndɛ mber yi obaa a oaba kae
Wɔtsir nhwi dɛ serekye ahoma
Wɔtsir nhwi dɛ serekye ahoma, Amponsa
Obaa Amponsa na modo no yi
Obaa Amponsa tsedɛ bronyi basis
Odo Yɛwu Amponsa na modo no dodow
Yaa Amponsa medze sika bɛyɛɛ wɔho adze
Amponsa ee, gyae aware ee ee ee gyae awre Yaa Amponsa ee gyae aware

---

Obaa Amponsa tsedɛ serekye amonse
Gyae aware, ee gyae awae ee gyae aware, gyae ware, gyae aware
Gyae aware
Amponsa ee gyae aware are

Odo Yɛwu Yaa Amponsa, Amponsa!
Y'atsena benu ye, Amponsa eyi me ama obi
Yɛnntsena afa n'adwen
Odo Yɛwu medze sika mema wɔ na adze

Obaa Amponsa megyae aware a!
Ama w'aware gyae w'aayɛ me yaw dodow
Odo Yɛwu sɛ modo wɔ, whose daabi
Amponsa mehu Nana
Emi mese mehu wɔ Nana
Amponsa ee megyae aware ee ee ee

Odo Yɛwu Yaa Amponsa
Gyae aware, gyae aware yi a!
Gyae aware ma ma yɛntwe mpona
Yaa Amponsa megyae aware a, gyae aware ma yɛntwe mpona are

Amponsa megyae aware a!
Wɔnanom dze muoko abasram', w'egyanom dzidzi m'atam
Yaa Amponsa megyae aware
Obaa Amponsa megyae aware
Obaa tuntum tsedɛ ahoma
Obaa tuntum tsedɛ bronyi
Obaa basia tsedɛ bankye
Amponsa ee gyae aware oo!
Amponsa ee gyae aware
Amponsa ee gyae aware
Obaa Amponsa ee gyae aware oo!

Synopsis:

1. The husband was describing the wife, Amponsah as very beautiful, thus her hair was like silk twine, like white lady.
2. Amponsah had stopped marriage to the total surprise of the husband
3. It was because of her beauty that the husband married her.
4. Out of the sorrow of the husband, he was requesting her to have secret relationship with her even though the marriage had come to a halt.

Literal Translation to English:

1. Yaa Amponsah, you have stopped marriage.
2. Your hair is like silk twine.
3. Yaa Amponsah you are like a white lady, very beautiful.
4. Because of your beauty, I love you so much.
5. This is why I performed your marriage rites with the deserved cash.

6. Even though you have stopped marriage, you are like silk olden pad for women which cannot be gotten rid of by me.
7. You have stopped the marriage but let us secretly continue the marriage relationship.
8. Like the black twine, you are indeed very beautiful.

"Amponsah - Part 2"

Written by: Jacob Sam/Kwame Asare.
Performed by: the Kumasi Trio
Translation and interpretation from Fante by: Andrew Mensah
Assisted by: Elana Cohen-Khani

Original Fante Lyric

Ebei!
Obarimba dasenyi krakye a
Moroko enyimnyamdo maba
Moboto enyimpa mberɛntsɛ a
Mobotoo nyimpa miɛnsa
Yɛretow kokoo wonndzi

Anhwɛ no yie a baako abo ka
Onyimpa nua Kwame Among a mensɛe da
Mensɛe da, mensɛe da, Adwoa ba
Mensɛe da ee, Na menie fun ee

Odo nnyim hianyi aware
Odo nnyim kente aware, Adwoa ba ee!
Hmn, Edu ba ee, Adwoa ba ee!

Odasanyi benya wɔ kyerɛ yare
Odasanyi benya wɔ kyerɛ yare
Hmn, onyimpa paa dze ontum nku onyimpa
Obaa bɛn yi Kwame Amo ee
Na morobowu mayɛ gyan Adwoa ba ee

Mensɛe da as! a mensie fun aa

Mensie fun a, mantse a, dabɛn? Adwoa ba ee
Ato nkyen akyɛ wodze muoko da w'ase ee
Otanfo beyifo atse woho asɛm
Oyɛ Dan na obegyae wɔ a Adoma
Adoma wonyim dɛ mayɛ sansanyi na ewar me a?

Nkyɛ ma menam ho are
Nuaa Abena Aye,
Nuaa Abena Aye!

Odasanyi bɛyɛ tie obi nnyim dze
Nuaa Abena ee
Otanfo beyifo atse woho asɛm
Oyɛ dɛn ma onnka?
Ankoanoma onnyim hianyi aware
Nuaa Abena ee
Obi nnyim sɛ obi bowie
Kyerɛ Nyame
Obi nnyim obi n'ewie kyerɛ Nyame ee!
Kyerɛ Nyame ee,
Kyerɛ Nyame ee

Onyimpa Nua Kwame Amo, mensɛe da aa
Na mensie fun Auntie
Adaben, Mensɛe da a!,
Mensie fun as

Ebei, Ebei, Ebei, Ebei
Kwame mebɛyɛ mbobor oo, mebɛyɛ mbobor! Mebɛyɛ mbobor

Anhwɛ no yi a baako abo ka
Hmn, Kweku Nyame Ye ee
Kweku abo ka
Kwame Akwa ee, Enubo ee, Enubo Okyerɛma a
Odomankoma owu ama
Mayɛ fa gya bra gyan
Odomankoma owu ama mayɛ fa gya bra gyan
Megyina gyan ee
Megyina gyan ee
Megyina gyan ee
Hmm, mensɛe da ee
Hmm, mensie fun ee
Mensɛe da ee ee ee!

<u>Synopsis</u>:

The song talks about a fairly old man that married a beautiful young lady. The matter is that it was the young girl who lured the old man to herself for the marriage. Then it was not long before the girl told the man that she would not

marry because the man was old. The man also remarked, you knew I was old that you married me.

Literal Translaton to English:

1. Amponsah, as your husband I was attending nature's call.
2. Upon my return, I found two other men struggling with me as the legitimate husband of yours.
3. I remarked: Onipa nua Kwame Amoh, I will not regret; I will not relent my effort to be the legitimate husband; as a result, never will I take out my life
4. I remarked again: Edu ba ee! Adjoa ba we! It is only sickness that can cause a man's downfall in life.
5. This situation cannot kill a person like my type
6. I will, as a result, never take out my life; kill myself.
7. With this situation, I have bought salt for Amponsah, my wife, only to be thanked with pepper literally.
8. Referring to you Amponsah as Adoma, you know I was a stupid person. Why then did you marry me?
9. Nobody knows the upliftment of a person; nobody knows the end of life of a man except God.
10. Onipa nua Kwame Amoh, never will I take out my life.

"Mami Wata"

Composed by: unknown
Performed by: Kwaa Mensah
Release: *Vintage Palmwine* cd, Otrobanda
Release Date: 2003
Transcribed from the recording by: Nathaniel Braddock

Original English Lyric

And I die tomorrow, and I die tomorrow,
And I die tomorrow, Mami Wata go bury me.

And I die tomorrow, and I die tomorrow,
And I die tomorrow, Mami Wata go bury me.

Any day, any time
Any time, any day, Mami Wata go bury me.

Any day, any time
And I die tomorrow, Mami Wata go bury me.

I am a sea-boy, I am a sea-boy
I am a sea-boy, voyage is my home.

Voyage is my home, voyage is my home
And I die tomorrow, Mami Wata go bury me.

Any day, any time
Any time, any day, Mami Wata go bury me.

And I die tomorrow, and I die tomorrow,
And I die tomorrow, Mami Wata go bury me.

Any day, any time, any day, any time
Any day, any time, Mami Wata go bury me.

I am a sea-boy, I am a sea-boy
And I die tomorrow, Mami Wata go bury me.

Mami Wata go bury me, Mami Wata go bury me.
Go bury me, Mami Wata go bury me.

Any day, any time
Any time, any day, Mami Wata go bury me.

"Mamie Water"

Composed by: Aldwyn Roberts (Lord Kitchener)
Performed by: Lord Kitchener & the Fitzroy Coleman Band
Release: Melodisc 1335, 78 rpm
Date: c. 1950s
Transcribed from the recording by: Nathaniel Braddock

Original English Lyric

O, what a life! I am alone without a wife
As far as I can see, Mamie Water go bury me

If I die tomorrow, if I die tomorrow,
If I die tomorrow, Mamie Water go bury me.

I was courting in Sierra Leone, and my lady friend let me down
That is why the Lord Kitchener is going to live with Mamie Water.

If I die tomorrow, if I die tomorrow,
If I die tomorrow, Mamie Water go bury me.

I was sit in the rocking chair, scrutinizing her lovely hair
I will kiss her and without fail I'm going to play with her fishy tail

If I die tomorrow, if I die tomorrow,
If I die tomorrow, Mamie Water go bury me.

I will take her to Kumasi, and the city of [uncertain]
In the loveliest motor car, it will be me and Mamie Water

If I die tomorrow, if I die tomorrow,
If I die tomorrow, Mamie Water go bury me.

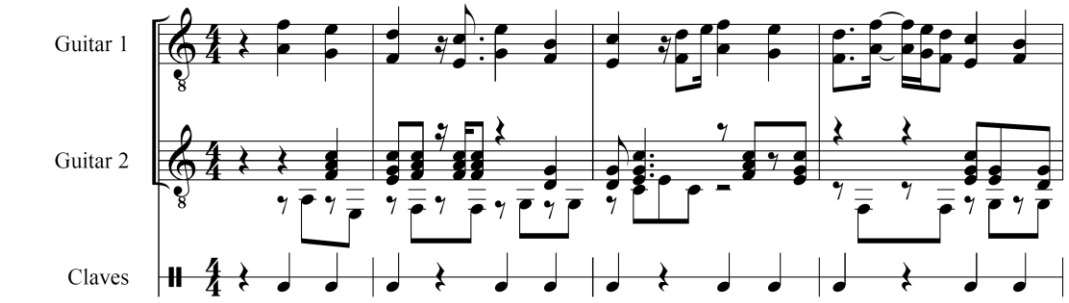
That's why I'll be leaving entirely, I want to be far from everybody
I'm going to live by the waterside, and Mamie Water will be my bride

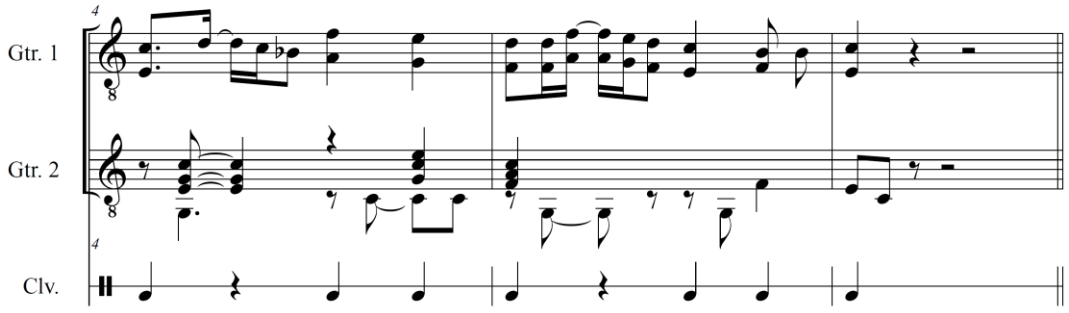
If I die tomorrow, if I die tomorrow,
If I die tomorrow, Mamie Water go bury me.

APPENDIX II: Additional Transcriptions

Kumasi Trio: "Amponsah – Part 1" [incorrect]

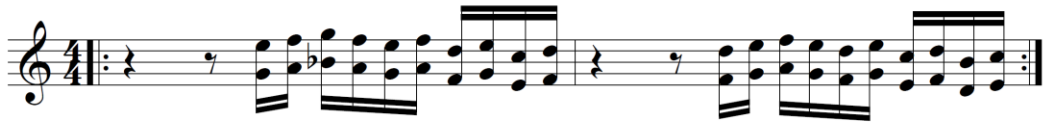
The following example is with an INCORRECT beat orientation (with the percussion on-beat). The correct placement of the notation is found in Figure 4.19 on page 95.





Franco: "Attention Na SIDA"

This transcription is transposed from A♭ to C.



APPENDIX III: Abbreviated List of Yaa Amponsah Versions

Please note that many of these songs were released many times in multiple formats from many labels. The years listed below are often not of the original release, but of the year my referenced pressing was issued. For example, the George Aingo Williams and Kumasi trio sides were originally issued by Zonophone on 78rpm disk, but here they are listed under their cd reissue.

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Gyasi, Dr. K. & Noble Kings. 1995. “Sika Pe Saa Nnye” *The Best from Essiebons, Vol 10*. Streaming Album.

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Kaika Ku’s Band. 1997. “Obi Amanie Osan Obi.” *Adonten Presents Highlife Oldtimers, Vol. 2.* Adonten Productions.

Love, Christiana. “Se Woama Mebre.” (No source information available).

Mann, CK & His Carousel 7. 1973. “Matow Abowa” *Party Time With "Ceekay"*. Vinyl LP. Essiebons. EBL 6114.

Mann, CK. 1998. “Fa Wakoma Ma me.” *The Legendary C. K. Mann*. Nakasi Records . CDNAK 70103EB.

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Mensah, Kwaa. 1983. “Yaa Amponsah.” Private lesson tape made for John Collins.

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Nimo, Koo. 1990. “Aburokyire Abrabo.” *Osabarima*. Adasa Records. ADCD 102.

———. 1990. “Owusu Se M'Amma.” *Osabarima*. Adasa Records. ADCD 102.

———. 1990. “Naa Densua.” *Osabarima*. Adasa Records. ADCD 102.

———. 2003 “Yaa Amponsah.” *Vintage Palmwine*. Audio CD. Otrabanda Records. OTB02.

Kumasi Trio. 1993. “Amponsah - Part One.” *Kumasi Trio – 1928*. Audio CD. Heritage. HTCD22.

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Abelo, Losta [Congo]. “Nasikitika Bumbalaka.” *Katanga Acoustic Guitar - 1950s*. Audio CDR. Collection by Elijah Wald.

Atiase, Selasee [Ghana/USA]. 2005. “Mami Water.” *Run*. Streaming Album.

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Biayenda, Jean-Emile [Congo]. 2015. “Mami Wata.” *37 Best World Lullabies*. Streaming album. ARB Music.

Bibb, Eric [USA]. “Mami Wata / Sebastian’s Tune.” *Global Griot*. Audio CD. DixieFrog. DFGCD 8810.

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Diabate, Grand Papa [Guinée]. 1999. “Mami Wata.” *Guitar Extra Dry*. Audio CD. Popular African Music. pam ag 703.

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Hi-Life International [England/Ghana]. 1984. “Abrokyire Abrabo.” *Music to Wake the Dead*. Vinyl LP. Rounder. 5014.

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Jérôme, Eba Aka [Côte d’Ivoire]. 2012. “Mami Wata.” *Grand Soirée aven Eba Aka Jérôme*. Steaming Album.

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Okonta, Eddie & His Top Aces [Nigeria]. 1991. “Aybrokpe.” *Azagas & Archibogs - The Sixties Sound Of Lagos Highlife*. Audio CD. Original Music. OMCD014.

Olaiya, Victor [Nigeria]. 2009. “Yabomisa Sawale” *Marvellous Boy: Calypso from West Africa*. Audio CD. Honest Jon's Records. HJRCD38.

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APPENDIX IV: Photos

Figure A-IV.1: I took this photograph of one of the three known copies of the original Kumasi Trio recording in 2008. If I had predicted that I would one day write this thesis, I might have had the foresight to take a picture of the A side!

Figure A-IV.2: This photograph comes from the collection of Loveliest "Kofi Elektrik" Addison. And was taken at recording sessions for Paul Simon's *The Rhythm of the Saints* CD. Addison is pictures with guitar, Cameroonian Andrew Manga has the bass, Simon is far left, and Addison could not identify the engineer at right.

APPENDIX V: Glossary

adakim: a large, square drum made entirely of wood. The drum is pictured in the one known picture of the Kumasi trio and measures approximately 1m x.5m x .3m. It is no longer used regularly but is heard in the earliest palmwine records from Ghana.

Akan: Ghanaian ethnic and linguistic family that includes the Fante and the Ashanti, but not the Ga or the Ewe.

Ashanti: Akan ethnic and language group centered in the city of Kumasi and ruled by a king, the Asantehene. The Ashanti speak Twi, one of the Akan languages.

balafon: Traditional wooden-keyed, pitched percussion instrument. Antecedent to the marimba, and played by Mande jalis, or griots. The balafon is an important component of the Sundiata epic.

concert party: Traveling Ghanaian theater and music performance beginning in the early 20th century. These productions are no longer active today, but components are present in many aspects of the contemporary culture.

dagomba: Early palmwine Rhythm associated with the Kru.

dawuro: Ashanti handheld bell, struck with an iron stick.

Fante: Ghanaian ethnic group historically based on the country's central coast, around Cape Coast. They are traditionally fishermen and speak Fante, one of the Akan languages.

fireman: Early palmwine Rhythm associated with the Kru.

frikywa: Iron bell shaped like a clamshell and played one-handed. The player hangs the bell over the middle finger and strikes it with an iron ring that is around the thumb. The frikyiwa frequently accompanies palmwine and highlife music.

griot: Traditional Mande musician, traditionally employed by royalty, more properly called *djeli* or *jali*. Griots are known as singers and for playing balafon, kora, and ngoni.

harmonic rhythm: The rate and structure of harmonic change in a passage of music.

highlife: Ghanaian urban popular music that developed in the 1940s. Today the term encapsulates most Ghanaian popular music but originated with guitar band and dance band variants.

hiplife: Ghanaian style of hip hop that fuses hip hop and highlife.

Kwaw: Ghanaian style that is a subset of *Ɔdɔ Nsan*.

Juju: Yoruba popular music that develops in part out of Nigerian palmwine styles.

kora: Twenty-one string harp played by Mande djelis, or griots.

Mainline: Early palmwine Rhythm associated with the Kru.

Mande: Cultural and ethnic group deriving from the era of the King Sundiata's Great Mali empire (1235-1255), comprising much of contemporary Mali, Senegal, the Gambia, and Guinée, as well as parts of Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mauritania, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire.

Mandingo: Ethnic group and language from Guinée, and one of the Mande peoples.

modal: In the setting of this thesis, modal refers to the *Kwaw* style *Ɔdɔ Nsan* Rhythm.

ntrowa: Ashanti gourd rattle

osibisaaba: Early Fante name for palmwine music.

Ɔdɔ Nsan: Ghanaian Rhythm that descends from the music of the seprewa harp.

palmwine: A lightly alcoholic drink made by either tapping (as described by Amos Tutuola in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*) or felling a pulping a palm tree and letting the liquid ferment for a couple of days in the hot climate. It is made in many cultures across equatorial Africa and Asia. It is served in calabashes. Customarily, only men drink palmwine.

palmwine music: A style of music played in coastal West Africa, specifically the regions in contemporary Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria. Its roots are traditionally African, but it developed in an era influenced by contact with Europeans and specifically incorporates instruments like the guitar and its harmonic vernacular. Other imported instruments include the mandolin, banjo, and concertina.

prefecture: Guinéen administrative area, further divided into sub-prefectures.

sankofa: Ashanti concept and Adinkra symbol expresses the principle of exploring the culture's history to develop new art that is also traditional. It translates roughly as "go, and bring back."

Seprewa: Traditional Ashanti harp-lute with a double bridge and two manuals of 4-6 strings per side. It is associated with *Ɔdɔ Nsan* songs.

Rhythm: Please refer to Chapter I for usage of "rhythm" in this thesis.

Sikyi: Traditional percussion ensemble rhythm, and also guitar band genre that develops out of *Kwaw* style.

Twi: The most commonly spoken Ghanaian language, it is Akan.

APPENDIX VI: Bibliography

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APPENDIX VII: Additional Discography

Please note that many of these songs were released many times in multiple formats from many labels. The years listed below are often not of the original release, but of the year my referenced pressing was issued. For example, the George Aingo Williams and Kumasi trio sides were originally issued by Zonophone on 78rpm disk, but here they are listed under their cd reissue.

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———. 1992. “Suantsi.” *Roots of Highlife 1927*. Audio CD. Heritage. HTCD17.

Kitchener, Lord. 2020. “Africa Is My Home.” *London Is the Place For Me - 8*. Vinyl LP. Honest Jon's Records. HJR078LP.

———. 2020. “Birth of Ghana.” *London Is The Place For Me: Trinidadian Calypso In London, 1950-1956*. Vinyl LP. Honest Jon's Records. HJRLP2.

———. 2020. “Kitch In the Jungle.” *London Is the Place For Me - 8*. Vinyl LP. Honest Jon's Records. HJR078LP.

Mensah, E.T. 1991. “Ghana-Guinea-Mali.” *Day By Day: Classic Highlife Recordings of the 1950’s and 1960’s.* Audio CD. RetroAfric. RETRO3CD.

Occidental Brothers Dance Band International. 2008. “Mafiwo.” *Ɔdɔ Sanbra (Come Back, Love).* Self-released.

Simon, Paul. 1990. “The Rhythm of the Saints.” *The Rhythm of the Saints*. Audio CD. Warner Brothers. W2 26098.

Uwaifo, Victor. 2008. “Guitar Boy and Mamey Wata.” *Guitar-Boy Superstar 1970-76*. Audio CD. Soundway. SNDWCD012.