



The Introduction of Popular Music Courses to Ghanaian Universities

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Abstract

Although the teaching of African traditional and art music in Ghanaian universities began from independence in 1957, the introduction of local popular music has taken much longer, partly a consequence of imported high art notions that treated popular music as trivial, ephemeral and lowbrow. Although Ghanaian Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah utilised local popular, traditional and arts music in nation building, after his overthrow in 1966, his vision was never fully transmitted into the universities, where students were only expected to be bi-musical, that is, familiar with traditional music and art music. The first evidence of a growing Ghanaian academic interest in popular performance studies was the pioneering work of the university lecturers Efu Sutherland, K.N. Bame and Attana Mensah during the 1960s/70s. Yet this area was not included in the curriculum until the 1990s, when the University of Ghana changed its position due to several factors. One was the burgeoning local popular music industry (after the music industry decline during the 70s/80s military regimes) and the consequent job opportunities for students. Another was the rise of pop-influenced local gospel music from the 1980s that sanctified the guitar and dance-band music. Thirdly, there was an interest in Afro-pop by foreign world music students coming in large numbers after Ghana's economic liberalisation of the late 1980s.

Keywords: University of Ghana; African popular music; music courses; job opportunities; world music; highlife music

First let me say how pleased I am to deliver this paper at this conference, because the last time I spoke at an IASPM event was when Paul Richards and I co-presented a paper on West African popular music at the Association's very first conference in Holland in 1981. Now, thirty years later, I am making this presentation about teaching African popular music at university level in Ghana.¹

I have sometimes been asked why is it necessary to study African popular music in the colleges and universities of Ghana, as some believe it is too ephemeral, too trivial and too lowbrow. Nevertheless, the first generation of great African leaders – such as Nyere of Tanzania, Sekou Touré of Guinea, Keita of Mali and Nkrumah of Ghana – all fully recognised the important role that popular music and mass entertainment played in the independence struggle. For instance, in Ghana during the late 1940s concert parties (i.e. popular theatrical groups) such as the Axim Trio staged plays in support of Nkrumah and his 'Independence now!' sentiments, whilst highlife groups such as E.K. Nyame's guitar band, The Ramblers, The Tempos and other dance bands wrote numerous pro-Nkrumah songs. Not only did Nkrumah and the other first generation of African leaders foster traditional African performance: they also established state popular music bands, while the trade unions established national

competitions and recording studios to sustain them (see Collins 2009/2010). Nkrumah also made sure that music was taught at all levels of the education system and that such education included African music and dance as well as Western music. In fact Nkrumah was, to coin a phrase, 'tri-musical' in that from 1957, he and his Convention People's Party used African, western and popular music for nation building and in the quest for 'the African Personality'.

Although the teaching of Ghanaian traditional and art music in Ghanaian universities began shortly after independence in 1957, the introduction of Ghanaian/African popular music has taken much longer. Nkrumah's 'tri-musical' policy of utilising Western, African and popular music was never transmitted into the universities where students were only expected to be 'bi-musical', that is familiar with African traditions and with Western classical music, and their fusion into local forms of art music. This curriculum was developed in the University of Ghana's School of Performing Arts from 1957 by luminaries such as Professor J.H.K. Nketia, Professor A.M. Opoku and Dr. Ephraim Amu. Their pioneering work in documenting, developing and teaching traditional African music (and dance) was a major breakthrough at that time.

It was also in the late 1950s and 1960s that the first evidence of a growing academic interest in local popular performance studies surfaced through the pioneering work of university lecturers Professor Nketia (1956), Professor K.N. Bame (1968), Efua Sutherland (1970), Professor Atta Annan Mensah (1971/2), all from the School of Performing Arts, and through the British pianist Robert Sprigge (1961) of the History Department. However, the university courses themselves remained stubbornly 'bi-musical' throughout this time and into the 1970s and 1980s. Besides the overthrow of Nkrumah and his 'tri-musical' vision in 1966, another reason for the exclusion of popular music studies at Ghanaian universities was the succession of military governments in Ghana from the late 1970s. These resulted in the collapse of the local popular music industry, an exodus of musicians abroad and also the general demotion of music courses in primary and secondary schools.

Fortunately, from the late 1980s there was a stimulus in Ghana concerning the African popular music through outside influences. Firstly, it was in the late 1980s that the economy was liberalised and the country began to move towards civilian rule. There was a dramatic increase in the number of foreign tourists coming into the country from a mere 85,000 in 1985 to over a quarter of a million in 1995.² Many foreign visitors were interested in local culture and entertainment and had already become fans of African popular music (Afro-pop) through the impact of 'world music' that began to surface globally from the mid-1980s. They stimulated the local nightlife, some studied music and dance at the University of Ghana, and many collaborations took place between local and foreign popular artists. For instance, in 1988, Nana Danso's Pan African Orchestras worked with British rock musician Peter Gabriel to produce the first Ghanaian world music hit, 'Opus One'. In 1992, the government initiated the bi-annual PANAFEST (Pan African Festival) around the theme of 'reuniting the African family'. Afro-American soul singers Stevie Wonder, Isaac Hayes, Dionne Warwick and Roberta Flack served on the initial International Advisory Board. The rap group Public Enemy played at the first event, and later Rita Marley did the same.³

In 1990 US singer-songwriter Paul Simon followed up his 1986 South African-influenced *Graceland* album success with another album on the WEA/Warner Brothers label, *The Rhythm of the Saints*. This album contained the song *Spirit Voices* which used the old Ghanaian highlife tune *Yaa Amponsah* that generated \$80,000 in royalties, used to establish the Ghana National Folklore Board in 1991. The Board consisted of folklorists, academics, poets, copyright lawyers and myself, alongside three other musicians: Koo Nimo, Oscarmore Ofori and Nana Ampadu. I should add it was when I was giving a talk on early palmwine highlife at a Folk Board public conference in Koforidua in the early 1990s that some of the academics who attended

asked why I was not teaching at the university and, indeed, why popular music itself was not on the university curriculum.

The twelfth annual IASPM conference, held in Accra in August 1987, certainly encouraged a re-appraisal of the role of popular music by Ghanaian academics. One reason was that the local organising committee included some university staff (such as Klevor Abo and Patience Kwakwa).⁴ Moreover, trips were organised for the foreign delegates to visit the Institute of African Studies and the School of Performing Arts at Legon. One thing that particularly struck the delegates was the dilapidated and deteriorating state of the Institute of African Studies (IAS) with its six hundred hours of reel to reel tape field recordings collected during the late 1950s and 1960s. As a result one of the IASPM conference delegates, Dr. Wolfgang Bender of the University of Mainz, was able, with the cooperation of Dr. Simeon Asiamah of the IAS music archives, to obtain a German government fund to digitise the entire archive. I was also able to assist Dr. Bender as a member of the Ghana National Folklore Board/Copyright Administration. After many years of negotiations the project was finally completed between 1993-4. I acted as Technical Director and two DAT copies were made, one for the University of Ghana and the other, a safety copy, was stored at the University of Mainz.

The first early sign that the Ghanaian universities were becoming interested in the teaching of popular music came in the late 1980s when Kwaa Mensah was employed as a 'palmwine' highlife guitar instructor, first at the university in Cape Coast and then, until his death in 1991, at Legon (Figure 1).⁵ This was an important breakthrough as, up to then, the guitar was considered an instrument only fit for drunkards, drop-outs and vagabonds. In 1995 I was brought into the Music Department at Legon to help set up its first courses on African popular music. In 1997 these courses were made official and expanded through the course re-structuring carried out by the late Professor Willie Anku, who also introduced digital recording studio courses. In 1995 I also began teaching highlife guitar. Teaching duties for these practical courses were later taken over by veteran highlife musicians T.O. Jazz and, more recently, Ebo Taylor. When I began teaching guitar in 1995 I had just ten students; now there are around one hundred. One factor that made it easier to introduce guitar, and popular music in general, into the curriculum was that from the 1980s dance band music was fused into local gospel music: popular music became 'sanctified', so to speak.



Figure 1 – Kwaa Mensah in cloth with guitar, 1947.
(Photo from J.Collins/BAPMAF Archives)

One particular reason why popular music became so important for our Music Department is that, as mentioned, formal music teaching in the junior and secondary schools was demoted in the late 1980s, a trend resulting in a sharp decline in the number of job opportunities for music teachers. Up until that time the provision of music school teachers was the main focus of Ghana university music departments. From the 1990s there was a huge growth in the commercial entertainment sector, after its low point during the military regimes of the late 1970s and 1980s. While this music industry boom was partly due to the tourist/world music factor, the return to democracy saw a massive expansion of the local music industry based on new technologies that ‘democratised’ music production and distribution (digital studios, FM radio, music videos, local CD burning). New popular music genres were emerging, such as ‘burger’ (disco), local gospel dance music and ‘hiplife’ (local rap). These developments all involved university music students needing some sort of expertise in African popular music, as well as in studio technology and in commercial aspects of music (unions, copyright, music management, promotion, etc). Through the efforts of the late Professor Willie Anku and myself, the Music Department at Legon now offers five diploma, undergraduate and graduate courses in African and Ghanaian popular music. We also have two Process of Arts courses which provide students with work experience courses in the local music industry and several courses started by Professor Anku on recording studio work. For the newly created popular music courses I was able to use teaching material (slides, musical samples and literature) from the BAPMAF African Popular Music Archives that some concerned musicians (such as Kwaa Mensah, E.T. Mensah, King Bruce) and myself had set up in 1990 to preserve the traditions of Ghanaian/African popular music.

Since the late 1990s, the Music Department has also been running a pop and 'highlife' band which for the last few years has been directed by the veteran 'highlife guitarist' Ebo Taylor. This ensemble trains students in performance, composition and arrangement skills while also showcasing quality 'highlife' performances for local people and foreigners. So, just as the United States has its own national 'jazz' music played by college groups, our university was the first in Ghana to establish a band playing Ghana's own national popular music, 'highlife'. The Music Department at Legon took a pioneering role in opening up popular music studies and setting up a popular music band. These ideas have been taken up by the universities at Winneba and Cape Coast, where there are now popular music courses and newly established pop and 'highlife' bands.

I'd like to now consider the reasons why African popular music is not only relevant to university music and performing arts students for the various reasons already discussed, but also to those studying other areas in the humanities, such as the social, developmental and political sciences, African and black diasporic studies, gender studies and history. I will turn first to the area of politics.

The Independence Struggle and Mass Culture

As mentioned earlier, popular music was part of the nationalist struggle and of a search for an African identity, an area of considerable interest to political scientists. In Ghana many 'highlife' bands supported Nkrumah and the CPP (Convention People's Party). E.T. Mensah and his Tempos band played at CPP rallies, Kwaa Mensah wrote a song welcoming Nkrumah out of British prison in 1951, E.K. Nyame released forty pro-Nkrumah records, the Broadway Band accompanied Nkrumah on international tours, whilst the guitarist Onyina celebrated the formation of the Organisation of African Unity in Accra with his 1958 record, 'Destiny of Africa'. It should also be noted that African popular performance is often trans-ethnic and so provides an artistic 'lingua franca' or common language for the new urban centres, with their mixed ethnic and linguistic populations. For example, Congo Jazz and Swahili Jazz are sung in Lingala and Swahili, the trade languages of Central and East Africa, while some Nigerian and Ghanaian Afro-beats and 'highlife' songs are sung in pan-West-African Pidgin English, or use linguistic code mixing. It is because of its trans-tribal, rather than ethnic nature, that some early independence leaders used popular music to project national ideals. Nkrumah's use of 'highlife' and President Nyere's use of Swahili jazz illustrate this unifying potential of 'non-tribal' African popular musics.

African popular music studies also demonstrates the importance of the urban masses in the formation of a new African culture, as popular performers have been largely drawn from the 'intermediate' classes (see Barber 1987) that lie between the national elites and the traditional subsistence farmers. These intermediates include labourers, petty traders, agricultural workers, miners, artisans, new rural migrants, clerks, lorry drivers, messengers and seamen. In Ghana some members of this poor and sometimes homeless sector of society became the shock troops of Nkrumah's CPP, and so became affectionately known as the 'veranda boys'. In other words, not only did Nkrumah set up a mass political party, he also endorsed the popular music of the masses. Despite their supposedly lowly social status, it is from this intermediate layer of society that many of the great popular artists of Africa have emerged. And being in the middle of things, so to speak, they are in the perfect situation to act as cultural and artistic bridges between the high and the low, the urban and the rural, the old and the new, the local and the foreign. All this has enhanced their creative ability to produce new African art forms. This artistic role of members of the African masses therefore questions developmental theories that suggest cultural innovation is the prerogative of the educated national elites.

Political Protest Music

African popular music is not only relevant to the struggle for independence, but also as a medium of socio-political critique in the post-independence era. The songs of Thomas Mapfumo of Zimbabwe and Fela Anikulapo-Kuti of Nigeria against corrupt, inefficient or dictatorial African governments are well known examples of this. Mapfumo has criticised President Mugabe in recent years, whilst Fela Kuti consistently opposed corrupt governments and supported what he called the downtrodden masses or 'sufferheads'.

Over the years local 'highlife' songs have also been directed against various Ghanaian regimes, but usually in disguised form, typically through the use of proverbs and metaphor. One famous example is the African Brothers' famous 1967 'highlife' song *Ebi Tie Ye* ('Some Sit Well') which is about big animals pushing smaller ones away from the warmth of a camp fire. Although couched as an animal parable, it concerned the unequal distribution of wealth and power in post-independence Ghana. Like George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, it depicts modern social stratification. Another is the 'highlife' song *Agyimah Mansah*, released by K. Gyasi in 1964, about a ghost mother lamenting the plight of her children. President Nkrumah questioned Gyasi about the lyrics, and although the composer claimed these were based on a dream and were not a political reflection by 'Mother Ghana' on the sorry state of the nation, the song was banned on radio (see Collins 1992).

Social Commentary and the History of the Inarticulate

Unlike the 'immortal' works of 'classical' art, popular music lyrics have an immediacy that easily reflects and articulates the current events and changing sentiments of society. 'Immortal' art music on the other hand concerns the worldview and aesthetics of an earlier period and is, in a sense, stuck in the 'time-warp' of that epoch. This difference between art and popular music on the question of longevity can be compared to the difference between newspapers and books. Newspapers comment on immediate events whilst books have a longer shelf life and usually dwell on topics of a longer lasting or more abstract nature. Although different, both are important in disseminating information. This same division of labour applies to art music and popular music. Both present different but equally important types of musical information and aesthetics.

The argument therefore that popular music studies are trivial and of less consequence than art music studies is invalid because popular music texts can provide social scientists with the current views, commentaries and aspirations of people of the street, including those of the downtrodden and marginalised. The use of old popular performance texts can be used as a source of information by historians who want to find out what the non-literate colonial masses were thinking in the past: it's the story of people who never wrote their own history but nevertheless expressed it through performance. A content analysis of popular texts over the years can, therefore, provide a 'history of the inarticulate'. This approach was used, for instance, by T.O. Ranger (1975) into his research into the colonisation and de-colonising 'tribalisation' process evident in early twentieth century East Africa, though the lens of the local Mbeni style of brass band music.

In the case of Ghana the 'highlife' songs and plays of the country's concert parties (popular theatrical groups see Collins 1976) from the 1940s to the 1980s often dwelt on the theme of broken homes, inheritance disputes, witchcraft accusations within the family and the orphan state (Figure 2). Social scientists talk, often neutrally or even in terms of 'progress', about the change from African extended families to the modern nuclear 'ideal' that has been going on in Africa over the last century. But the reality is that western laissez-faire economics has led to extended African families fragmenting through a sort of internal 'civil war'. Concert party lyrics and texts provide a

glimpse of how Ghanaians have dealt with this catastrophe through the use of catharsis and humour.



Figure 2 – Concert party highlife musical play poster, late 1960s, portraying the theme of broken homes.
(Photo from J.Collins/BAPMAF Archives)

Urbanisation

Another reason for the teaching of popular music courses in the universities is that they can throw light on urban studies. For instance, sociologists talk of the process of ‘urban pull’ in which African rural migrants are lured to the urban centres through new job opportunities and the general attractions and lifestyle of the big city. These new city ideas, norms and fashions have often been disseminated into rural areas via popular performance genres. For instance, the Ghanaian concert parties began touring the rural and provincial area in the 1930s, long before the introduction of radio and television. It is worth noting that besides the attractions of city life, ‘highlife’ plays and songs can also portray the danger of modern urban life such as prostitution, drunkenness and economic uncertainty (see Collins 2004).

As mentioned earlier, popular performance also acts as a ‘lingua franca’ in polyglot African cities. ‘Highlife’ itself was created by several different ethnic groups in Ghana and is therefore sung in various languages, or in a mix of them. One trick that King Bruce and his Black Beats’ ‘highlife’ band employed in the 1950-60s, in attempts to cover the southern Ghanaian market, was to release a record with one of his Ga songs on one side and an Akan song on the other. The ‘highlife’ concert parties also use linguistic code mixing, as the songs and dialogue are performed in a variety of languages, depending on the character and the location of the play. They also present ethnic stereotypes in a humorous way and thus help diffuse ethnic tensions.

Generational Identity and Youth Subcultures

In terms of sociology, there are links between specific popular music styles and various urban youth subcultures. Indeed, even in the area of traditional African music, there was a dynamic factor related to generational shifts. I’m referring here to the fast-changing youthful recreational music created by successive emergent age sets.⁶ In the case of popular music itself we have the Ghanaian example of *konkoma* (or *konkomba*)

'highlife', created by the Akan youth of the 1930s as a poor man's version of earlier local Adaha brass band 'highlife' music. *Konkoma* did away with expensive imported instruments and made do with easy to acquire local instruments. *Konkoma* was also associated with young *ruffians* and school drop-outs who marched in army-type uniforms in rowdy street parades. Although the Ghanaian elders disliked this music, the British very cleverly exploited *konkoma* for recruiting young Akans into the British Army during the Second World War.

A later case in point is the *kpanlogo* drum dance of the 'area-boys' of old Accra. This was created in the early 1960s out of pre-existing Ga traditional music as well as 'highlife' and rock 'n' roll. The older generation hated this music, particularly its incorporation of the US dance, the 'twist'. It was banned for several years before the intervention of Nkrumah and the CPP. (See Collins 2002 & 1996.) Other youth subcultures later emerged that were associated with current youth fashions, music and lifestyles, including the impact of soul and Afro-American fashions, resulting in 1970s Afro-beat, Afro-rock and the disco influenced 'burger highlife' of the 1980s, whose artists imitated Michael Jackson. More recently, hip-hop-influenced 'highlife', or 'hiplife' artists wear hoods, baggy trousers and 'bling bling', but rap in local languages.

Gender Studies

In the area of gender studies, 'highlife' and other forms of local popular music lyrics reveal prevailing attitudes about the status of women and the way these have changed over the years. Sixty years ago only a handful of Ghanaian women appeared on stage, two of the earliest being Agnes Aryitey and Julie Okine, both of whom played for E.T. Mensah's Tempos in the mid-1950s (see Figure 3). In the 1960s and 1970s, a small generation of local pop artists like Lola Everett, Charlotte Dada, Asabea Cropper, Christie Azuma and Joanna Okang emerged. Today, however, there are thousands of female singers and recording artists who have entered the music profession through local gospel bands. Previous taboos about women playing on the stage do not apply to women who play church music, albeit in danceable popular music form (see Collins 2007b & 1996). The fact that popular music has acted as a barometer for changing attitudes to women has been used by the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies, which recently established a Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA). In 2007 CEGESA set up its 'Changing Representations of Women in Popular Culture' music project. As a Research Associate I helped collect 300 Ghanaian popular songs from the 1930s to the present that were relevant to gender issues. CEGENSA is currently translating and organising this material.



Figure 3 – Julie Okine with trumpeter E.T. Mensah and his Tempos, mid-1950s (photograph courtesy of Mr. Vanderpuie).

Africa and the Black Diaspora

An important role of university-based popular music studies is that it helps in understanding the long term relationships and cross-linkages between Africa and the black diaspora in the Americas. African music was taken to the Americas during the days of slavery but returned in transmuted form from the nineteenth century through the sambas, calypsos, spirituals and ragtime of freed slaves and black soldiers, sailors and missionaries. Later came jazz, soul, the rumba, reggae, hip hop and so on. This musical ‘homecoming’ completed a trans-Atlantic cycle of music from Africa to the Americas, and back to Africa. The study of popular performance can therefore be used to help extend and further develop the story of this fruitful trans-Atlantic cultural dialogue. These links between the ‘Black Atlantic’ (Gilroy 1993) of course not only includes popular music but also the general impact of the Black Americas on Africa in terms of black nationalism, architecture, literature, foodstuff, etc.

The very first documented case of the musical home-coming to Africa occurred when freed Maroons from Jamaica settled in Sierra Leone in October 1800, bringing with them their *goombay* frame-drum music and dance (see Collins 2007a). From Freetown, Sierra Leone, *goombay* was disseminated through twenty West and Central African countries and helped lay the foundation of numerous twentieth century African popular music styles (*maringa*, *ashiko*, ‘highlife’, juju music, *makossa*, etc). This early date puts the black trans-Atlantic artistic exchange well ahead of the black nationalist one, and well before the impact on Africa of Black American and Caribbean political thinkers such as Blyden, Cesaire, Dubois, Garvey and Padmore.

Conclusion: Developmental Studies, the Modern and Traditional

African traditional and popular performance styles co-exist side by side, and they constantly interact with one another. On the one hand many forms of African popular music draw on indigenous rhythms, melodies, dances, languages and motifs. Yet, on the other hand, popular music can also exert an influence on traditional music-making, leading to new or ‘neo-traditional’ drum-dance music styles. New ‘traditional’ Ghanaian genres that have been influenced by urban ‘highlife’ music include the

previously mentioned *konkoma* music of the Akan and the Ga *kpanlogo*. Other examples are the 1930s 'simpa' music of the Dagbon area of northern Ghana, and the 1950s *borborbor* of the Ewe people of South-Eastern Ghana. All of these neo-traditional styles employ local instruments and are played in ceremonial/recreational contexts even though they have been influenced by popular music. For instance, *borborbor* music was developed partly out of *konkoma* music around 1950 in the town of Kpandu. It uses local Ewe hand drums and percussion and a ring dance, and a 4/4 'highlife' rhythm, the *pati* drum (a copy of a military side drum) and the bugle or trumpet of brass bands. In some ways the mutation of adaha brass band music to the poor man's *konkoma* style and to Ewe *borborbor* music can be compared to the 'tribalisation' of East African *mbeni* music into the *kalela* and *malipenga* forms discussed by T.O. Ranger (1975), Clyde Mitchell (1956) and others.

As African popular music draws on tradition and also influences it (i.e. neo-traditional genres), the relationship is circular. There is dynamic feedback between the old and new, the rural and the urban, the traditional and the popular. This throws doubts on simplistic mass-communication and developmental theories of social change that see tradition and modernity as antagonistic, or believe that tradition is always a brake on modernity, or suppose that there is only a single, straight path from tradition to modernity.

Endnotes

1. This article was presented as the keynote address for the 17th Biennial Conference, 'Situating Popular Musics', International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM), 27 June - 1 July 2011 at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. Apart from my work discussed in this article, further articles of mine can be found on the BAPMAF Highlife Institute website: www.bapmaf.com.
2. Today it is over 800,000 bringing in the equivalent of \$1.615 million a year in foreign exchange.
3. In the early 2000s Rita Marley settled in Ghana and established a recording studio.
4. I was also on the organising committee but at that time had not started teaching at the university.
5. He was also my principal 'palmwine' guitar teacher during the 1970s and 80s.
6. It can be argued that many forms of early African popular music can be treated as simply extensions of traditional youthful recreational music styles that absorbed specific innovations from the West to distinguish themselves from the music of their elders.

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