

The Evolution of Traditional Ghanaian Music and Influence from Western Society

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ABSTRACT

Located in West Africa, Ghana is a country rich in ancient culture, tradition, history, and music. This research took place during January and February of 2005 and consisted of studying the role of traditional music in contemporary Ghanaian society as well as its use in rural and urban areas. Project methodology included various interviews, travel to rural communities, archival research, and audio recordings of traditional music. Project goals included an understanding of how traditional music is used in contemporary Ghanaian society, why traditional music is fading, how Ghanaians feel about this loss, and any significant differences between its use in rural and urban areas. In conclusion, four major elements have contributed to the loss of traditional music: exposure to Western music, urban migration/lifestyles, Christianity, and Christian-based education.

INTRODUCTION

To begin with a little background information, Ghana is a former British colony and the official language is English, however, there are at least 75 other languages and dialects spoken. A few of the local African languages include Twi, the most widely spoken African language in Ghana, Ewe, Ga, and Fante. Ghana was the first African country to win its independence on 6 March, 1957. The capital, Accra, is located on the Atlantic coast and in terms of religion, 63% of Ghana's population is Christian, 16% Muslim, and 21% Indigenous beliefs. Before diving into the research, it's important to clear up a common misconception I've heard regarding African music: it's the same everywhere on the continent. This is not true. Even though there are some broad similarities such as, African music has always been an inseparable part of the culture and tends to use a similar, basic instrumentation that includes drums, bells, and shakers, there are far more differences. For example, over 1,000 languages are spoken across Africa so this alone creates a tremendous amount of diversity. To expand upon this, there is an incredible amount of diversity just within Ghana. Ghana has ten different regions, each with its own capital. Every region is often associated with a specific ethnic group with their own unique history, religious beliefs, staple foods, language or dialect, and musical practices. During my first visit to Ghana, I traveled to the small town of Hohoe with the University of Ghana's concert choir for the unfortunate event of our own choir director's funeral. During the funeral service, I leaned over to a friend and asked, "What are they saying?" Of course I had no idea because everything was in an African language, which I assumed was Twi. My friend replied, "I have no idea, they're speaking Ewe!" Keep in mind, this funeral was only a three hour drive from home. This diversity also extends into the various musical practices of different ethnic groups. If you were to play an example of a song or dance for a Ghanaian with even a small knowledge of traditional music, they would be able to pick out exactly which ethnic group the music is from.

This was not my first visit to Ghana but the second, so it felt much like a homecoming. Two years previous I had studied abroad at the University of Ghana in the spring of 2003. During my stay, I studied traditional African music and dance at the University of Ghana and the experience was incomparable. In one particular class, Intro to African Dance, we learned various songs and dances from different ethnic groups across Ghana. Aside from music and dance classes, I learned about the everyday life, the food, morals, traditional dress, the culture, religious beliefs, proper etiquette, and so on. As the semester winded to an end and having traveled Ghana extensively, I thought I had learned everything I needed about Ghanaian music, but discovered I was quite mistaken upon return to the United States as many unanswered questions surfaced. One particular error was when traveling, my friends and I visited only larger cities so I had a strong understanding of urban life, but not rural. These rural areas were still a mystery.

After returning from Ghana, word spread that a new professor of African history was joining UW-La Crosse so I eagerly sought out Cameroonian Dr. Bridget Teboh, excited to meet someone who was from a country somewhat close to Ghana. It was Dr. Teboh who suggested I apply for an international research grant. This proposed the perfect opportunity to search for those unanswered questions such as, how is traditional Ghanaian music used in a rural village compared to an urban city? After the first visit, it was obvious that there was a considerable loss of traditional music among urban Ghanaians. I wondered if Ghanaians in general were concerned about the loss of traditional music and even more importantly, what exactly is causing this loss? These were the exact questions I set out to discover in January of 2005.

METHOD

This research was conducted using several approaches. In order to acquire a complete, accurate conclusion for this particular research, it's important to first have a cultural understanding. Other contributors included interviews with both music and non-music students and professors at the University of Ghana, as well as the queenmother of Ntonso, a small village located in the Asante region. Travel was also an important part of the research. I traveled to Kumasi, located in the Asante region and visited the Kumasi Cultural Center where I was able to interview several knowledgeable individuals on traditional music as well as make audio recordings that were used for oral presentations. I also had the privilege of attending a memorial service and several church services that incorporated traditional music into their worship. Lastly were archival resources from the University of Ghana's Music Library and African Studies Library.

RESULTS

Before beginning the research, I had some personal predictions of the final results. To begin with, when visiting rural villages I expected to find a knowledgeable community. I predicted that people would have a general knowledge of traditional music, its history, meaning, and also the ability to sing, dance, and play a variety of traditional songs and dances. This I found was not true. I was also expecting to find a village historian, a person designated as the traditional music expert who could provide an oral history of the music for that particular region. This I also found was not true. I did however find a difference between the traditional music and dance taught at the University of Ghana's Fine Arts Department compared to the same music and dance found among the tribe and region where the music originated. The music and dance found in villages was often more accurate and authentic and many students within the Fine Arts Department confirmed this. I also expected to find more oral transmission of traditional music in rural areas, which I found was true, whereas in larger cities like Accra and Kumasi it is usually a subject learned in school.

So what exactly is causing the loss and changing role of traditional music in Ghana? The four major contributors that I found were: exposure to Western music, urban migration and lifestyles, Christianity, and Christian-based education.

Exposure to Western music has had a serious impact in Ghana and it can easily be observed on any average day in Accra and everywhere in Ghana for that matter. The popular music in Ghana today is American hip-hop, pop, rock, country, and gospel as well as Ghanaian highlife and hiplife, a combination of African and Western elements, and music from other African countries. Wherever you go, this is the music you will hear blaring from homes, taxis, and markets. Because of this exposure to Western music, interest in traditional music and in some cases exposure to it is dying, most dramatically among the youth.

Urban migration and lifestyles have also contributed to the loss of traditional music. There have been recent high numbers of Ghanaians moving to larger cities, often in search of a job to support a family or to find a better life. Many Ghanaians live a typical, modern lifestyle going to work during the day or classes, then coming home to their families in the evening and on top of that any extracurricular activities. This type of busy lifestyle does not allow traditional music to be a part of everyday life activities.

In traditional Ghanaian culture, music was a form of entertainment. People would gather to sing, dance, and tell stories in the evenings, but this has changed with introduction of alternative forms of entertainment such as dance clubs, movie theaters, bars, TV's, stereo's, video games, and the internet.

"African gods are music loving gods." This was a saying I heard frequently when questioning Ghanaians about Christianity's influence on traditional music. The arrival of Christian missionaries has been recorded back to the fifteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese. However, it was the Wesleyan/Methodists and Basel/Presbyterians who laid the base for the Christian church in the nineteenth century. As the church established

itself and began winning converts, Africans who converted were not allowed to practice their traditional music or dance inside or outside of the church. This is because African music and dance is often tied into religious beliefs and these indigenous religions were seen as 'pagan' by the church. Even so, traditional African music continued to thrive because this created isolation between those who converted and those who refused and continued to practice their music and culture. However, the number of Christian converts continued to rise and traditional music became seriously threatened among converted families. In traditional culture, it is the parents and community's responsibility to pass down music and dance to their children. However, among these converted Christians, this transmission began to fade because converted Christians were forbidden to practice their traditional music. This phenomenon is still very apparent today with the high number of Christians in Ghana and my host family was the perfect example. They were very strict Christians and their children had little knowledge of traditional music, the little of which they probably learned in school, but they knew almost every hymn in the hymnal because that's what they were taught.

Lastly is Christian-based education. Christian-based schools forbid the teaching and practice of African music and culture for the same reasons as the Christian church. Today, traditional African music and dance is taught in schools although usually only in elementary and middle school and it is not often used afterwards. Another downfall to Western education is it stops the informal acculturative process. This means when children are sitting in a classroom all day, it stops the natural cumulative process of oral transmission. Of course education is tremendously important and it's not going anywhere, it has however added to the loss of traditional music. Finally, many parents today do not encourage their children to practice traditional music and dance because they often think, 'What could you do with it?' From my own experience, it seems many parents prefer their children to study science or math.

During my time in Ghana, I conducted various interviews but two stood out the most. Both individuals had remarkably different opinions regarding the loss of traditional music. In January, I had the honor of interviewing the queenmother of Ntonso, a small village outside of Kumasi. The queenmother is an ancient figure in Ghana. She is a political ruler with a status similar to a chief and on occasion can take the position of chief. Upon asking the queenmother of Ntonso several questions regarding traditional music and what she feels has contributed to its loss, she had many responses. She replied that people used to gather in the evenings to tell stories, sing, and dance but technology is changing this. She was particularly concerned with the youths disinterest in traditional music and emphasized the majority prefer contemporary music. Many youth are also scattered, going to school all over the country and are thus not immersed in their culture. "The elders of the village hold traditional music very close and would never let it go. Chiefs and queenmothers are doing all they can to prevent traditional music from disappearing."

Another interview that stood out was with a professor at the University of Ghana's African Studies Department. This professor said that traditional music was very much alive and has not been lost. I agreed with him that traditional music is still alive, but I think that it has been lost to an extent to the people. He also mentioned that it can easily be found on campus among students, which of course is true among students who are actually studying traditional music and dance, but I did not agree that this was true among all students at the University of Ghana. I spent an extensive amount of time on the campus and many non-music students have a limited knowledge and often little interest in traditional music.

With all this said, there is some good news. Many efforts are being made to preserve traditional music. There are various cultural centers throughout Ghana. These are organizations that teach traditional music and dance, provide instruments, and have regular performances. Also many Christian churches have implemented traditional music, rhythms, and instruments into their services. I had the opportunity to visit several Christian churches in Ghana and I was surprised by the variety between services. One particular church that I visited in the small village of Agbozume, used quite an interesting combination of African and Western instruments and musical styles. At this particular church, they had African drums, bells, and shakers, all of which were playing traditional rhythms along with an organ, electric bass, guitar, and a drum set. All the lyrics were set in Ewe, the predominant language of that region. Another church I visited was conducted solely in Twi, with some church hymns translated into Twi and others in English. The church where my host father directed the choir was conducted solely in English, with only English hymns and it reminded me, perhaps a little too much, of the church services at home. Other efforts include festivals throughout the calendar year meant to bring awareness of culture and music. Today many popular Ghanaian musicians incorporate traditional instruments and rhythms into their music and in January, when President Kufuor was being inaugurated into office, there were two individuals playing the huge traditional fontom from drums, which I thought was a fantastic way to incorporate traditional music into a political event.

So what does the future look like for traditional music? As discussed earlier, there is a difference of opinion between individuals, however, after speaking with many Ghanaians, I found that the majority were concerned with

the loss of traditional music. Personally, I'm sure traditional music will continue to fade and its role will continue to change. I think the biggest threat is the possible disappearance of oral transmission because as Ghana continues to develop, these rural areas will become more like urban areas. In my own opinion, I predict that traditional music will someday be the knowledge of individuals who studied it at a higher institution. Of course modernization and development are important for Ghana, but it has caused serious loss and the real task at hand is how to fit traditional music into a modern society. In the end, the future depends on the youth. Although efforts are being made to conserve traditional music, a considerable number of youth are inactive in its preservation, leaving the future uncertain.

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