THE POLITICAL MEANING OF HIGHLIFE SONGS IN GHANA

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This paper explores the political meaning of Ghanaian Highlife songs, which are generally regarded as pure entertainment. The paper is the result of a close cooperation between a Ghanaian insider (Asante-Darko) and a European outsider (Van der Geest). More than one hundred Highlife songs were collected, transcribed, and translated. All these texts are recorded songs. Nearly all Highlife songs examined in this paper are in the Twi (or Akan) language. (The Akan are a collection of culturally related societies with mutually intelligible languages. They number about four million people and live in the southern part of Ghana.) It should be made clear, however, that Highlife is also performed in other languages, within and outside of Ghana.

This brief paper does not discuss the methodological problems involved in the use of artistic expressions for anthropological purposes. This has been done elsewhere (Fabian, 1978; Asante-Darko and Van der Geest, 1981). Instead, it analyzes the meaning of songs and people's reactions to them. The first section of the paper provides background information about Highlife music in Ghana. The second section deals with the hidden meaning of art in general and, in particular, with the hidden political meaning of Ghanaian Highlife songs.

HIGHLIFE MUSIC IN GHANA

Highlife is a blend of traditional Akan rhythms and melodies with European musical elements, such as the use of European instruments and harmony.[1] It encompasses a variety of artistic expressions: music, dancing, story-telling, and theater. Performances by Highlife bands are called concerts, even in the Twi language. They usually start with a comic or tragi-comic play filled with musical effects and intermezzos and end with a performance of Highlife songs (Richard, 1974; Collins, 1976a). Both the play and the songs can be about many different topics, rural or urban, modern or traditional, true events or stories. Generally, however, the songs deal with the problems of everyday life: poverty, marriage problems, hatred, gossip, shame, sickness, and death (Bame, 1974; Ricard, 1974). Apart from live performances, Highlife owes its popularity to recordings, which are produced in Ghana.

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Highlife originated from approximately the end of the nineteenth century, when Fanti people on the coast acquired European instruments. Western music such as marches, popular songs, and church songs influenced these musicians, as did music from West Indian and Liberian sailors (Collins, 1976b). The history of Highlife is clearly documented (Bame, 1975; Collins, 1976a; Nketia, 1954; Smith, 1962) only from the 1920s onward. There were two traditions of Highlife: the elitist dance bands in the big towns, and the guitar bands which toured the countryside (Coplan, 1978: 100-101).

At present there are over one hundred bands in Ghana which play Highlife. The most popular among these include:

E. T. Mensah and his Tempos Band
Ramblers Dance Band
C. K. Mann and Carousal 7
The Sweet Talks
Konadu's Band
Oko's Band
All Brothers Band
E. K. Nyame's Band
City Boys Band
Ashanti Brothers Band
Kakaiku's Band
The Sweet Beans
The Police Dance Band
The Army Dance Band
The African Brothers Band
Kakaiku's No. 2 Band
Okukuseku's Band
Onyina's Band
Yamoah's Band
K. Gyasi and his Noble Kings
Akwaboa's Guitar Band
Ogyatanaa Show Band

Records with Highlife constitute popular entertainment at homes, drinking and dance bars, and parties. Highlife records are also popular at funerals for mourning the dead. One of the co-authors, Asante-Darko, remembers that in the fifties people used to carry gramophones around town to play Highlife music to make money. Now there are public radio boxes at market places and lorry parks. During "Listeners' Choice" programs for guitar band music, people gather near the boxes to listen to Highlife. There are even national championship competitions for Highlife bands which attract a lot of public attention; and at football matches and other public occasions, police and army bands entertain the spectators with Highlife.

It is obvious that Highlife music has many different functions in Ghanaian society. The first and foremost is, of course, entertainment. People love its rhythm, melody, and text. Partially because of its immense popularity, Highlife is also used for purposes other than pure amusement. Since many songs reflect the problems of daily life, people use them to air their frustrations. The songs thus are at the same time a reflection of and a reaction to social problems. The most prominent examples are Highlife songs about death, which are used by mourners at funerals to express their grief (Van der Geest, 1980). Highlife songs can also have an ideological function if they (in various degrees of directness) instill social norms and values. Examples are songs which uphold the picture of male dominance (Asanto-Darko and Van der Geest, 1981). Outright propaganda in Highlife songs is mentioned by Bame (1977), who reports the role of a Highlife band in disseminating family planning ideas. Further, Highlife songs can become political tools for the oppressed as well as for those in power. The second section of this paper examines this function more explicitly. Another somewhat peculiar function lies in the field of commerce and advertising. It is not uncommon that new cloth designs are given the names of titles of Highlife songs which are currently popular. Some examples are *Yaw Berko, Aku Sika* (Golden Aku), *Ofie*

Nwansena (Housefly), *Aban Kawa* (Handcuffs), and *Afe bi ye asan* (Some years are full of trouble). It is not altogether clear whether these names are given spontaneously by the people who buy the cloth or whether the names are part of a well-planned advertising strategy (Boelman and Van Holthoorn, 1973: 239). A last function of Highlife songs is that their phrases are used for joking and phatic communion between friends and acquaintances who may develop their own jargon (Moore, 1969: 115). An example is the song *M'adamfo pa* (my good friend), which describes how painful it is when a good friend departs for good. *M'adamfo pa* became a common salute between two friends of ours when one of them was about to be transferred to another town.

THE POLITICAL MEANING OF HIGHLIFE SONGS

Before dealing with the hidden language of Highlife songs, let us briefly look at the double face of art in general. Huizinga (1970) remarks that art, particularly poetry, has a playful character. Some of its playfulness lies in the fact that art often obscures what it wants to express. A famous line of the Dutch poet Martinus Nijhoff reads, *Lees maar er staat niet wat er staat* (Read, it does not say what it says). Huizinga (1970: 157-58) gives a number of examples from various cultures to clarify his point—music, dancing, poems, and (to a lesser extent) plastic arts:

> The close connections between poetry and the riddle are never entirely lost. In the Icelandic *skalds* too much clarity is considered a technical fault. The Greeks also required the poet's work to be dark. Among the troubadours, in whose art the play-function is more in evidence than in any other, special merit was attributed to the *trobarchus*—the making of recondite poetry. Modern schools of lyric which move and have their being in realms not generally accessible and are fond of wrapping the sense in an enigmatic word, are thus remaining true to the essence of their art.

It is, however, not only artists who build a hidden meaning into their work, as Huizinga seems to imply. The public also may attach second meanings to products of art. This concealed meaning can have different functions. Huizinga emphasizes the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure which people find in the clair obscure of art. The secret language of art may also assume a political character: for example, it may become a code for insiders to communicate with each other without interference of political oppressors. It may even become a language in which oppressors are ridiculed without their noticing it and in which people find psychological relief for their frustrations. Examples are the Amhara (Wax and Gold) verses which are mentioned by Levine (1965). These verses consist of two semantic layers, one of which is hidden and only understood by insiders. The verses can, therefore, be used to criticize or insult others without their knowledge, but they are also used for intellectual play.

Slightly different is the function of spider stories on the Caribbean island Curaçao as described by Schweitz (1979). The spider stories express the concealed dissatisfaction of slaves with the existing society and their inability to resist their masters. The dissatisfaction shows itself in the fact that the spider, who is the personification of the slaves, time and again outwits the official authorities. The stories, therefore, have an escapist character.

This view comes very close to Wertheim's (1974: 108) concept of counterpoint, a set of values which is contrary to the dominant value system. Wertheim's thesis is that such a counterpoint expresses itself in disguise and provides merely psychological relief. It does not threaten the dominant value system. It is a kind of *Ventilsitte*, an outlet to blow off steam. A similar view is expressed by Merkel and Richter (1977) in their analysis of the social meaning of fairy tales. What never will come true in real life is dreamed of in fairy tales. In the same vein, Lowenthal (1961: 160) hypothesized that more stories will have a happy ending in periods of economic recession than in periods of prosperity.

This phenomenon of double meaning in art, either popular or elitist, is also present in Highlife. One such hidden meaning, the political one, will now be discussed.

In January 1978, when Ghana had already sunk to economic disaster and political corruption, one of the co-authors, Van der Geest, traveled in an old lorry from Wenchi to Kumasi. At that time, Acheampong was Head of State. (He was later overthrown and a year after that executed on the accusation of large misuse of public funds.) During the journey, Van der Geest conversed with the driver, and coincidentally they came to talk about certain Highlife songs. Van der Geest quoted one of his favorites, *Aware bone* (Bad marriage), by Nana Ampadu. In a free translation the text reads as follows:

Bad marriage tears the cloth.
Bad marriage, when they talked about it,
they did not lie.

New love with its enjoyment blinds the lovers.
Thus I have come to suffer.
Bad marriage, that's what I have come to.
Bad marriage, everyday I am frightened.

If I go to bed I cannot get up the following day.
I am suffering.
I pray to God that my worries may end.
Oh God, I pray to You, give me strength.

In bad marriage there is a trap.
In bad marriage there are creditors
knocking on your door.
In bad marriage there is always some dispute.
In bad marriage there is buying on credit,
and struggling to survive.
Everyday there is debt.
In bad marriage there are quarrels.
In bad marriage cases are settled every three days.
Bad marriage, what have I done!
Bad marriage, when shall I have peace!
If everybody is suffering like this,
who will get something to take home?
If I have only come to lose,
I better go to my family.
Bad marriage, tears the cloth.
Bad marriage, when they talked about it,
they did not lie.
New love with its enjoyment blinds the lovers.
Thus I have come to suffer.

Van der Geest liked the song because of its literal meaning—the way in which the problems of married life are described. During that journey, however, he discovered that the song had a second meaning, at least to his companion. The driver explained to him that this song was about Mother Ghana who was married to a man called Acheampong. This was a bad marriage, and as a result, everybody was suffering. Clothes were torn, people could not sleep and had heavy debts; everybody was quarreling, etc. In the driver's account, the song was an allegorical description of Ghana's predicament. It is unlikely that Nan Ampadu had this hidden meaning in mind when he composed the song.[2] The second allegorical meaning was probably given to it by the public, who used this song to express their anger and frustration with the government in a disguised and, therefore, safe way.

Another song was probably composed with the intention of insulting Acheampong. This song by Konadu bears the title *Yede wo*, which is best translated as "You are born with it." The text runs:

> You are born with it, you are born with it.
> If a man is wise, he is born with it.
> Wisdom cannot be bought.
> You are born with it.
> It is not sold to you.
> If you are a giant,
> it does not mean you should bully the small ones.
> It is better to send a wise man,
> than one with long legs.
> If you are speaking to an elder,
> be careful of what you say.
> If you are talking to people,
> watch your words.
> If you are speaking English,
> space your words properly,
> for you are not a child.
> If you speak English,
> do not always talk about food.
> If you are wise,
> you are born with it.
> Wisdom cannot be bought.

A few sentences in the song were recognized immediately as referring to Acheampong, especially the lines about speaking English. Acheampong was considered by many as a "bushman" who could not speak proper English. The mention of food was a clear allusion to Acheampong's national "Operation Feed Yourself" program, which had been a failure. Once these few lines had established the relationship with Acheampong, the whole song became very offensive. Acheampong recognized the offensive character and banned the song. It is clear, however, that in the eyes of the public, he thus made himself look even more ridiculous, as his action implied recognition of the ascribed meaning of the song.[3]

Ironically, Acheampong himself made use of a Highlife song when he overthrew the civilian government of Busia on 13 January 1971. The song *To wo bo ase* (Be careful), by Kofi Sammy of Okukuseku II Band, was played over the radio the whole day long, and *To wo bo ase* became the slogan of that coup. The following lines of the song were particularly relevant:

> Be careful, enemy.
> The one who will beat you
> has not yet come.
> That's why you say:
> "No one can beat me."

It is significant that some time later this song was no longer played on radio or television. Acheampong was probably aware of the fact that the hidden meaning of the song could also be applied to his own government. A song by Ampadu, *Afe bi ye nhyira, afe bi ye asan* (Some years are a blessing, some years are full of trouble) was also widely interpreted as a disguised attack on the government.

Other examples of Highlife songs with more or less disguised political criticisms are mentioned by Collins (1976b: 66-67). In 1967, Ampadu composed a very popular song, *Ebi te yie* (Some are well seated), which, in the form of a fable, criticized the increasing inequality in Ghanaian society:

> Once upon a time there was a general meeting for all animals to discuss their welfare. Every species of animal including the leopard and the duyker attended the meeting. It happened that the leopard sat right behind the duyker and subjected it to an unbearable bullying and ill-treatment while the meeting was in progress. First the leopard pinned down the tail of the duyker with his claws and he would not allow the latter to participate in the deliberations. As soon as the duyker began to speak, the leopard would shout him down and tell him that the meeting was not for small animals or hit him on the head and tell him that he was talking too much. The bullying and intimidation became so agonizing that the duyker could not bear it; he shouted, "Petition please on a point of order, chairman, secretary, gentlemen, honourable members of the meeting, we have had some deliberations since the meeting began, I would suggest we adjourn it until another day because not all of us are well or comfortably seated at this meeting. Some of us are well seated. Some are not so well seated, but others are not well seated at all." The animals gave careful thought to the duyker's remarks and read between the lines and got the full meaning because they had all seen what was happening. Thus they agreed to this suggestion and the meeting was adjourned.[4]

It is said that Ampadu was called in front of the military leaders to answer questions about the political meaning of the song. Ampadu presumably answered that he had only told a fable which he had heard from his father. The line *Ebi te yie* is still a popular phrase used to express in a joking way feelings of inequality.

One song by Ampadu was banned. The refrain of that song went: "Although the driver is different, the lorry is the same." The text was a clear attack on the National Liberation Council which had replaced Nkrumah. A song by Dr. K. Gyasi's Band, *Agyima Mansa*, recorded in 1964 when Nkrumah was on his return, was also never broadcast on the radio. In that song, the ghost of a mother expresses her grief about the suffering of her children, an obvious allusion to Mother Ghana. A more recent song with a political content mentioned by Collins is *Kanana*, composed in 1974 by King Pratt and his African Revolution. The political message of this song was much more open as it quoted some of Nkrumah's speeches. The piquancy was that this message was broadcast in Acheampong's time.

Another famous case is a song by E. K. Nyame's Band, *Nsuo beto a, mframa di kan* (Before it starts raining, the wind will blow). When Nkrumah was in power, his political opponent Busia, who lived abroad in Europe, requested this song on the Nigerian radio for listeners in Ghana. The song was widely understood as a warning to Nkrumah that his end was drawing closer. The full text of this song is:

> Before it starts raining
> the wind will blow.
> I warned you but you did not listen.
> Before trouble starts,
> there will be a flag (to warn you).
> I warned you but you did not listen.

Also, further back in history, Highlife was used for political means. Collins (1976b: 67) mentions the song *Kwame Nkrumah will never die*, which was composed by Axim Trio in 1950 when Nkrumah was imprisoned by the British. E. K. Nyame wrote a song *Onimdeefo Kukudurufo Kwame Nkrumah* (Honourable and heroic Kwame Nkrumah), referring to Nkrumah's release from prison.

In another publication, Collins (1976a: 53-54) shows that there was close cooperation between some bands and Nkrumah's Convention Peoples Party (CPP). The Axim Trio staged a number of concert parties in support of Nkrumah during the pre-independence years. The following songs are mentioned: *Nkrumah will never die*, *Nkrumah is a mighty man*, and *Kwame Nkrumah is greater than before*.

The last songs, pushing Nkrumah and his CPP, pose no question of a hidden aspect of Highlife: their political message is very clear. Of course, the colonial officials themselves rarely understood the Twi texts, but they could easily be translated for them. The political openness of the songs is possibly an indication of the relatively permissive attitude of the colonial government at that period and the large amount of political power which Nkrumah already had.

From there it is only one step to the use of Highlife by political leaders to spread their message and bolster up their image. When this happens, there is no longer reason for concealment, as the political message agrees with the dominant political structure. Obviously, such songs will be blunt and boring as they lack the titillation of "not saying what they say."

CONCLUSION

This brief essay examines a less-obvious aspect of Ghanaian Highlife songs, namely, their political meaning. Apart from entertainment, the songs can assume many other functions. They can be used for mourning, for commercial purposes, for phatic communion, for ideological, and for political means.

There are two ways in which Highlife songs can become political. The political dimension may have been intended by the composer, or the public may give a secret political meaning to a song which is already popular for another reason. When the political meaning of a song is intentional and opposes an oppressive regime, the message will be delivered in disguise. Such songs are likely to become the most popular as they are exciting and allow people to release their anger. Songs which proclaim the dominant political ideology are likely to be much less attractive.

The few examples examined in this paper suggest that the political function of Highlife songs is rarely that of a truly effective weapon. Highlife songs are more likely to be used to air criticism and anger against political conditions without significantly altering them. On the other hand, the political effect of Highlife songs cannot be dismissed altogether. Recent developments in Ghana suggest that Highlife songs may have contributed toward uniting the oppressed population and undermining the prestige and power of the ruling military elite.

NOTES

The research was carried out from 1971 to 1973 and in 1978-1979. Apart from the two authors, many more people have been involved in the collection of these Highlife songs. The help of the following persons is acknowledged: Samuel Asamoah, Nana Boateng, Kwasi Anim, Boakye Danquah, Margaret Hall-Badoo, Veronica Ampofo, Kofi Asiedu, and Gifty Anim. Funds for the research came from the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana; from the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO); and from the University of Amsterdam.

1. Sprigge (1961: 88) holds a slightly different view: "I regard Highlife music as a purely African product—a brilliant African invention. The claim that this is so is in no way affected, let alone invalidated by any evidence showing that the African has not produced the Highlife from exclusively African ingredients."
2. Interviews with Highlife composers could have shed more light on this question, but such interviews have not been conducted. One attempt was made but failed because the interviewers were suspected of seeking financial gains. It should be borne in mind that Highlife musicians have frequently been cheated by commercial entrepreneurs and, therefore, have every right to be suspicious.
3. The latest Highlife songs which criticize "Kalabule" (corruption, cheating) and other forms of injustice by the ruling class have not been included in this review.
4. The translation is from Collins (1976b: 66-67).

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