

EVOLUTION OF THE FANTE SACRED LYRIC

by

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1. Introduction

The Fante Sacred Lyric or Ebibindwom, as these songs are called, are traditional songs and have evolved out of certain musical types as a result of social change. These musical types which are rather old, are still performed by some Fante traditional musical groups.

The rise and growth of the lyric reveals evidence of social change in a new development of a musical type without evidence of change of musical culture. In determining the causes of social change, it is necessary to consider society as a system in which there are internal and external interacting components which are constantly working. The internal components are made up of certain psychological factors which motivate members of the society to act while the external components consist of certain environmental factors. On the other hand, however favourable the external components may be, no change will be effective unless the psychological drives and dispositions of the individual are involved. Change is an idea which is given very concrete external expressions. As a matter of fact, the external component, with its ideational, cognitive emotional content and the internal component with all that it offers, interact to effect change.

In Africa we have evidence of early contact with the external world, and also contacts of African peoples with one another. These contacts have produced new musical values as well as social values and customs. Very often these contacts have resulted in both new musical hybrids and re-creation of entirely new musical types as for example, the Fante Sacred Lyric.

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2. Music Syncretism

There are theories which musicologists have put forward relating to the external influence on culture in culture contact. Anthropologists have referred to this as a process of internal change in the acculturative situation. The process of internal change in music syncretism¹ which in itself is an aspect of re-interpretation. Re-interpretation is a process by which new values change the cultural significance of old forms.² To permit music syncretism in any two given societies, there should be enough similarity between the given societies.³ The relative homogeneity of music based on the concept of harmony and basic scale patterns in the two areas should be similar. Several anthropologists and musicologists have made certain generalizations on music syncretism. Alan P. Merriam⁴ asserts that when two human societies which are in sustained contact have a number of characteristics in common in a particular aspect of culture, exchange of ideas therein will be much more frequent than

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1. *I have borrowed this term from theology. It is a tendency to reconcile various systems of philosophy or religious opinion, especially against a common opponent.*
 2. *M.J. Herskovitz: Dahomean Narrative, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967) p. 553.*
 3. *Richard Waterman: African Influence on the Americas, in Sol Tax (ed.) Acculturation in the Americas, (Chicago: Proceedings of the 29th International Congress of Americanists) 1952.*
 4. *Alan P. Merriam: The Anthropology of Music, (Evanston: North-western University Press) 1967.*

if the characteristics of those aspects differ markedly from one another.⁵

Several factors have contributed to the development of new musical types including the lyric. Reinterpretation of old forms in a new situation. But the lyric owes its growth principally to European evangelism in Ghana. Since its inception the lyric has reached other areas in Ghana especially Ashanti through culture contact and similarity of common musical characteristics. Some of the characteristics common to the music traditions existing between Fantis and Ashantis are the concept of harmony and melody based on the heptatonic diatonic scales. But Fante and Ashanti are dialects of the Akan language. The tendency to borrow, substitute and blend musical elements from the two cultures is therefore easy and only requires a slight push. This was provided by the spread of the christian church and communication. These features may be seen as favourable syncretic conditions.

3. The Growth

The lyric and other hybrid musical types lie alongside the old representing additions rather than substitutions. The old musical types are still practised and enjoyed in many areas as living tradition. The speculation, which is rather widespread, is that the creative impulse in traditional music is somewhat levelling off and that some of the older forms may die out. These traditions are constantly being revived

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5. Note that Merriam worked his hypothesis in connection with the differential acculturation as exists in Africa and Flathead India. His contention was that the syncretism of both Africa and Europe in their stylistic characteristics identical to both areas which facilitate exchange and blending while in the case of European and Flathead Indian styles there was a lack of syncretism due to absence of common stylistic characteristics.

in the light of the present cultural awakening in Ghana.

The rise and growth of the Fante Sacred lyric which developed among the older female members of the Methodist Church is an instance of positive effect of social change. The lyric as a musical type was developed during the office of the Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman by the non-literate in Cape Coast in 1838.⁶ Its background tradition is a simple one. Rev. Freeman realized at some point that the non-literate members of the Methodist Church did not participate in the singing of the English hymns.⁷

He therefore encouraged members to sing biblical texts to traditional tunes. And it worked like this. Whenever a member drew inspiration from the sermon of the day she composed suitable texts derived from the sermon which she sang to a traditional tune. This process is very true even today. It is interesting to note that even today, the lyric which draw entirely on the resources of indigenous traditional music has not absorbed anything from western music regularly heard during worship. This developmental aspect of the lyric reveals evidence of social change in the growth of a new musical type which does not show evidence of change of musical culture.

4. Traditional Background of the Lyric

The story of the evolution of the lyric may be sought in many ways. Rev. Dr. S.G. Williamson has suggested two possible directions in which the traditional background of the Fante Sacred lyric may be sought:

6. This is the year in which Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman arrived in Ghana. Since there is no written account of the lyric I have used this year for convenience.

7. The early Methodist missionaries did not concern themselves with reducing the local languages into writing. This was a great set back in their evangelical work. The English hymns were not translated into local languages for use by members of the church.

Thus in the folk-tale Anansem it is traditional for the narration to suffer interruption (as the sermon is interrupted by the introduction of a lyric). Such interruptions may be either by way of diversion, similar to the entracte in Western dramatic productions, or may serve the purpose of commentary on the story or some aspect of it. These musical interludes may take the form of a regular, metrical song, or of recitative (call) and response.⁸

The lyric may be likened to the *mboguo* or song-interlude in an ananse story situation in that it provides a commentary on the sermon and brings out some interesting points in the sermon. But there are some differences between the *mboguo* and the lyric in their musical aspects. Musically the *mboguo* is shorter than the lyric. The similarity between them may be found in their interruptive function as well as commentary.

The second direction in which Williamson sought the traditional background of the lyric was the *asafo mmobome* and *asrayere* songs:

The *mmobome* and *asrayere* songs were used in time of war, disaster and emergency, and also at times of rejoicing and exultation, such as the enstoolment of a chief. They can be characterized as songs of invocation, excitement and exultation; and since the welfare and success of the state, at home and in the face of its enemies, was not possible without divine help, these songs might have a religious reference.⁹

Asafo has been the foundation of several Fanti musical types. The musical types which have probably

8. S.G. Williamson, The lyric in the Fante Methodist Church in Africa, Journal of the International African Institute, Vol. xxviii, No.2, April, 1958.

9. *ibid.*

evolved out of asafo include adzewa, adenkum, omps and many others. All except omps are performed by female bands but have male drummers especially in the case of adzewa. In certain places these bands have become wings of respective asafo associations. The repertoire of these bands contain songs of sadness and exhilaration.

I have mentioned above the possible sources of the lyric.¹⁰ Of the musical types given, adenkum seems to be the most probable source of the lyric. Some lyrics are adaptations of adenkum songs others are inspired by biblical thought. It is also possible to find adaptations of other musical types especially of asafo.

Expert lyricists differentiate between two types of lyrics, the old type and the new. The old type is said to indicate that the lyric is ancient and is based on adenkum or some such song-type. The new type is the lyric based on biblical text.¹¹

10. Rev. Dr. S.G. Williamson has suggested that the lyric may have derived from asrayere and mmobome. Here I will differ substantially in opinion with him in the choice of the musical types to support his argument. In form and content asrayere and mmobome or abobombe as the Fanti's call it differ considerably from the lyric form. I agree that abobombe has some religious reference but I doubt very much that the Methodist Church at the time of Rev. Thomas Freeman would have permitted its adaption in the church because it was used in connection with the local pantheon. The women in offering prayers to the pantheon in time of war, for the safe return of their men, and in disaster and emergency sang abobombe songs.
11. I held a long discussion with Mr. Peter Brown, an expert lyricist during a visit to his village. On the topic of lyric texts he pointed out the distinguishing features of the lyric types. The Rev. S.B. Essamuah, a lyric collector seems to agree with Mr. Brown's suggestions.

In examining lyric texts we find that some have little or no reference to the scriptures except for names identified with God: Nyame or Ewuradze or such honorifics as Gyefo, Baatan, Twarampon or Odoyefo which are in themselves expressions native to the area.¹²

5. The Location of the Lyric

Of all the traditional songs of the Akan the lyric is the most suitable for use in the church. The repertoire of the lyric contains songs that are particularly suitable for use in the christian church and includes songs about God, birth, life and death of Christ, songs about the prophets and events of the christian year. There are general songs reflecting on the pain of death, songs in which explicit references to bereaved families could be expressed.

The home of the Fante sacred lyric is Fantiland where it is regularly heard during worship in the Christian church. It grew up in Cape Coast about 1838 in the Wesleyan Methodist Church and gradually spread to other towns and villages with the church. In time the lyric reached other Akan speaking areas through contact with Fantis.

The lyric is heard in Fante speaking areas stretching along the coast from Nyanyano to as far west as the Ivory Coast border with Ghana. This may include Effutu, Ahanta and Nzima areas where Fanta is spoken as an alternate language, or where Fante has almost superseded the local language in the home. The first group consists of the people living beyond the estuary of River Ankobra.¹³ The Ahantas and Nzimas who live in this area have acquired Fante speech through contact with Fante speakers. There is evidence that in this group the singing of the lyric

12. The honorifics will be discussed in a later paper.

13. The Nzimas in the Ivory Coast also speak the Fante language and therefore included in this group.

is influenced by the local language. There is therefore a carry over of the phonological patterns of Nzima and Ahanta in the singing of the lyric.

The second is made up of the Effutu speakers.¹⁴ Here Fante is also spoken as an alternate language but with the same skill as the Effutu language. In several homes Fante has superceded Effutu. It is interesting to note that there is no evidence of carry over of the phonological patterns of Effutu in the singing of the lyric. It is heard with the same clarity as in Cape Coast or Anomabo.

The lyric is also heard among the inland Fantis. These people as well as the coastal Fantis are the principal users of this musical type. It features prominently in christian worship as well as in other social functions such as funeral celebrations and so on.

The lyric has been transplanted in other areas with considerable success. In Ashanti as well as the other remaining Akan areas the lyric is regularly heard during worship. But in funeral celebrations there is the tendency to use other appropriate musical types such as adow. However where the decease is a Fanti, those Fantis who have come to the funeral will always sing an appropriate lyric to mourn the dead.

In these places the feature of the lyric in worship is less prominent. As far as it is known the lyric has reached these places through contact with Fanti people. These are Fantis who either lived in these areas temporarily or engaged in some kind of occupation such as farming or trading. Early traders may also be responsible for this.

6. Users of the Lyric

Denominations other than Methodist use the lyric to some considerable extent. They have adapted the lyric into their churches through contact with the Methodist Church.

14. These are the Effutu speakers living in and around Winneba including Senya Beraku and district.

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church is one of these churches. The church owes its origin to a widespread resentment of the white control of the Methodist Church towards the end of the 19th century. Most of its early members were Methodists and were concerned with creating an African-controlled Methodist Church in the Gold Coast. In doctrine and ethos as well as music, the A.M.E. Zion Church has remained patently Methodist.¹⁵ Members had left the Methodist Church to join the African Methodist Episcopal Church because the latter attracted them as a 'black man's church'.

It is true that the lyric was first introduced into the Wesleyan Methodist Church but this church was late in writing down the lyric in the vernacular let alone translating the English hymns.¹⁶ However the Basel Mission incorporated 15 lyrics in their vernacular church hymn book. Unfortunately these seem to be the only Fante lyrics which were transcribed at the time.¹⁷ These lyrics were collected at Anomabo.¹⁸

The lyric is not heard only in the church but also during meetings of certain societies. These societies may be affiliated to a particular church. Such societies may be termed as closed societies. Examples are the Women's Fellowship and the Christ Little Band of the Methodist Church; the Anglican Women's Fellowship and the Catholic Mboa Kuw of the Anglican and the Roman Catholic Church respectively.

There are societies in which membership is open to all denominations of the christian church. The important

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15. R.W. Wyllie, Pastors and Prophets in Winneba, Ghana: Their Social Background and Career Development in Africa. Vol. XLIV, No.2, April, 1974. p.190.
 16. Methodist Archives: Gold Coast Methodist Synod Minutes. 6th February, 1871.
 17. Twi Kristofo Asore ne Dwom-homɔ (236 Hymns in Akuapem. 15 Songs of Native Christians in Fante), Basel, 1865.
 18. Hans W. Debrunner, A History of Christianity in Ghana (Accra: Waterville Publishing House) 1967, p.142.

ones are the Hope Society and the Honest Society. In these societies membership is made up not only of the orthodox churches but also from the syncretic churches too. They meet on specified days to share a common religious experience through the singing of lyrics and other traditional songs. In fact the singing of the lyric is a common feature of the societies mentioned above.

The lyric is also heard in some syncretic churches. These include the Musama Disco Christo Church, the African Faith Tabernacle,¹⁹ the Prophet Harris Church and a host of others. The history of these churches show that their members once belonged to some orthodox churches, notably the Methodist and Presbyterian churches.²⁰ This explains the use of the lyric in these churches: members had brought it with them from the Methodist church.

The lyric has become the foundation of their music. It is regularly heard during worship. But the singing style slightly differs from that of the Methodist Church in that it is more vigorous in tempo and accompanied on the drums and some concussion musical instruments.

The lyric is not used by the christian churches alone. It is also used by the Moslems during worship especially by the "Fanti Moslems" in the Gomua district and the districts around Cape Coast.

The story of the lyric in the Moslem church also shows a widespread resentment of the Methodist church. In the 1880's the Gold Coast Government brought in Mohamedan priests

19. This is popularly known as Nkansa after the name of its leader.

20. The founder of the M.D.C.C. and Prophet Harris movements were former Methodists; that of the African Faith Tabernacle was Presbyterian. They were expelled from the orthodox churches because they had the spirit of the holy ghost and spoke in tongues

to take charge of the mosques which it had helped to build for moslem troops stationed at Elmina, Accra and Keta.²¹ One of these priests seems to have been Abu Bakr Ibn Sadiq.²² Abu Bakr settled in Cape Coast in about 1885 where he ministered to the moslem soldiers stationed there. He made a big impression on many of the inhabitants in and around Cape Coast. One such persons was Ben Sam, a Methodist catechist of Ekroful, Gomua. He was also a trader. The impact of Abu Bakr's teachings on Ben sam was so great that the catechist together with his congregation went over to Islam and spread the gospel in the Gomua district. Ben Sam introduced christian and traditional elements into this worship. The lyric was one of the elements. But the singing of the lyric acquired strong Islamic features. In time these features greatly influenced the singing style of people living in the Gomua area.

Debrunner²³ writing about the Ben Sam movement and its break ground mentioned:

In 1875, there had been a Methodist revival in Ekroful and later many of the new members grumbled because of the financial obligations required of christians. We hear in 1878 that 251 members were excluded from the Methodist Church at Ekroful.

The Methodist Church in a report had declared.²⁴

We allow no member in the enjoyment of his health who refused to pay class money and ticket money to continue in society.

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21. Ghana National Archives: Dispatch of Gov. Griffiths to Secretary of State, 6th November, 1886.
 22. Hans Brunner, A History of Christianity, p. 241.
 23. Hans Brunner and H. and H. Fisher: Early Fanti Islam in Ghana Bulletin of Theology, vol. 1 7th December, 1959, pp. 23-35 vol. 1 8th June, 1960 p. 13ff.
 24. Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Reports 1878, p. 152.

This latent resentment of the Methodist Church in Ekroful found an outlet in the adoption of the Islam religion in 1880's among the people of Gomua.

The churches are not the only users of the lyric. Other organisations have come to be associated with the lyric. I have mentioned that certain societies which are wings of the orthodox churches sing the lyric during society deliberations. The fast springing benevolent societies are contributing to the growth and stability of the lyric. Here it should be understood that majority of the members of the benevolent societies belong to one orthodox church or the other. Like the Hope and Honesty societies these benevolent societies are interdenominational.

Many groups are emerging whose principal aim is to promote the singing of the lyric. They also learn and sing other traditional songs too. One such group examined is the Boka Nworaba Kuw (stars of the East Fellowship) resident in Accra and whose membership is mainly Fanti. This group is also interdenominational and like the other societies it helps its members in times of bereavement by attending funerals and contributing fixed sums of money for donations to help defray funeral expenses. Not only does the group attend funerals of its members, it also attends other funerals too upon invitation to provide traditional music including lyrics. Fees may be charged for this service to non members. The group also provides lyric singing in all churches during special celebrations. It also performs for Radio Ghana.

The lyric as a traditional musical form is significant as an indigenous mode of expression which has been adapted by the early Methodist Missionaries for use during christian worship. The lyric may have roots in indigenous traditional worship. As a traditional form the lyric is a vehicle of faith, projecting the true indigenous beliefs in the christian faith. Some of its texts show the traditional pre-christian devotional expressions of the Fanti. The lyric testifies to God's power of delivery. Such expressions as "He has changed our hell into heaven, or "He will deliver us from evil", all show a basic traditional religious belief that Nyame or Nyankopon (the greatest of friends) is the utmost judge to whom the defenceless can appeal for redress.