

CREATIVITY AND TRADITION IN NNWONKORO: THE CONTRIBUTION OF MAAME AFUA ABASA

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In African societies there are various musical traditions that form part of the indigenous culture. Thus there is music for both young and old. There is music exclusively for girls and women and others for boys and men. There is also music for mixed bands as well as music for associations such as those of hunters, fishermen and warriors. Warrior organizations, as the name implies, no longer function in most societies because there is now peace. They therefore undertake communal work such as building of bridges and other such tasks.

For the purposes of this article, examples are drawn from some Ghanaian societies. Some of these musical types found in Ghana include *Bamaya*, *Damba-Takai* of the Dagomba from Northern Region, *Agbadza*, *Boboobo*, *Gahu* of the Ewe from Volta Region, *Kpanlogo* of the Ga from Greater Accra Region, *Adowa* and *Kete* of the Akan from Asante and Eastern Regions, all of which are performed by mixed bands.

On the other hand some musical types performed by women include *Apatampa* of the *Fante* from Central Region, *nmane* of the Dagomba from Northern Region, *Avihe* or *Akaye* of the Ewe from Volta Region, *Adaawe* of the Ga from Greater Accra Region, *Adenkum*, *Bragoro* and *Nnwonkoro* of the Akan from Asante and Eastern Region. *Nmane*, for example, involves the use of an upturned calabash made from a gourd. Women are seated on the floor with the upturned calabash in front of them, and with a special metal ring worn on the middle finger of the right hand they hit the calabash with the bare hands, fingers and fists clenched to produce different tones played rhythmically and accompanied by singing. It is a song performed by maidens in praise of dignitaries of the area on festive occasion. It may also be performed purely for their own entertainment. There is also *Avihe* which is a choral lament performed by northern Ewe women, of the Volta Region, at funerals. The women sing to the accompaniment of small gourd rattles to express their grief.

Of all the Akan musical types for women, *Nnwonkoro* is one traditional musical type that has survived the test of time, thanks to the enthusiastic efforts of Maame Afua Abasa.

Born about 85 years ago in Kenkyirem, a village about 15 kilometers away from Kumasi in the Bekwai district of Ashanti Region of Ghana, young Afua was deprived of any formal education, which was a privilege reserved for boys only in those days. (This practice was widely adhered to in the villages in the past). As was the practice, a girl followed her mother to the farm, or joined her in whatever trade she was engaged in, and helped with other household chores. However, Afua showed early signs of musical knowledge as she actively participated in such children's games as *aso*, *mpeewa* and *anansesem*. All of these involved singing which she loved very much. In fact, she was well versed, eloquent and had the flair for interesting stories such that all other children always looked forward to her turn for story telling.

Women in those days gathered round in the evenings after the day's work, especially on moonlight evenings and sang to entertain themselves. In her village, the musical type that was usually performed by the women was *Nnwonkoro*. For her love of music, wherever the women performed, young Afua would be seen hanging around attentively listening to the songs which she would later on sing by herself. Sometimes during story telling, she would set her own words relevant to the story being told, to some of the *Nnwonkoro* tunes she had heard to the admiration of her mates. She had such a retentive memory that whatever songs she heard she could reproduce with ease.

In an interview with her about how she acquired her musical knowledge she said, "my lady, I think I am 'born' with it because nobody taught me anything in music". This underscores Nketia's statement that, "Traditional instruction is not generally organized on a formal institutional basis, for it is believed that natural endowment and a person's ability to develop on one's own are essentially what is needed". Thus by the exposure to different musical practices and actively participating in them young Afua was able to develop her musical knowledge.

Marriage, which took her away from her village to various towns did not deter her from singing. When finally she came to settle in Kumasi she continued singing and she taught her household various songs, which they usually performed for their own pleasure.

When in 1946, or thereabouts, the Gold Coast Broadcasting: in those days (now Ghana Broadcasting Corporation) proposed that more traditional singing be included in their programmes, Maame Afua Abasa and two others Kwame Boakye and Yaw Banahene readily consented to the formation of a group to perform *Nnwonkoro*, which would also benefit society at large, an idea she had been contemplating all along. Knowing that *Nnwonkoro* was now going to be enjoyed by a broader community, she worked hard towards achieving the best results, and fortunately gained support from the Asantehene at the time, Nana Osei Agyeman Prempeh II. Today, many such groups of *Nnwonkoro* exist and it is performed nationwide.

Nnwonkoro has not been the subject of scholarly writings and research. A few studies however, have been conducted on *Nnwonkoro* by J.H. Nketia (1963) and B.A. Aning (1969). Nketia in his book *Folk songs of Ghana*, gives a general overview of *Nnwonkoro* when and how it is performed, thematic basis, form and structure, and analysis of some songs. Aning in his unpublished thesis "*Nnwonkoro: A study of Stability and Change*", conducted a study of eight groups from Mampong, Wenchi, Sunyani, Abetifi, Beposo, Droboso, Berekum and Kumasi. He traced the origin of *Nnwonkoro* and working on the same lines as the former author, he observed similarities in song themes, style of performance, occasion for performances, form and structure of the songs. Both authors observed that *Nnwonkoro* themes are centered around loved ones, relations and the prominent men of a locality. Thus the text may be satirical, insulting, laudatory or may express disappointment, blame or bitterness. There are also songs about death.

In tracing the origin of *Nnwonkoro*, Aning states that before the present name *Nnwonkoro* came into being this musical style was called *Amannyina* (Stability of a nation), but no one has been able to ascertain this fact and

the reason for the name change. Meanwhile according to Aning the name used in Brong Ahafo for this musical type is *Agyina* literally meaning stabilizing, preserving or saving a nation from collapse or destruction.

In an interview with Maame Afua Abasa, she traced the origin of *Nnwonkoro* to dwarfs, *mmoatia*, short beings. She explained that it is a traditional belief that a woman by name Twumasiwaa was possessed by the spirits of dwarfs and therefore joined them in the forest, where they taught her a number of songs and accompanying movements. There is a maxim in Akan which explains – “If Twumasi had not gone mad and regained sanity, possession would not have existed”. On regaining her sanity she returned to the village and in turn taught the girls of the village. Eventually, this performance was taken up by the women and it has since remained. Maame Afua Abasa said that *Amannyina* was the former name for *Nnwonkoro* but does not know why it was changed. The first song purported to have been sung by the woman on her return reads:-

Y’agyina mmerantee y’gyina mo,
Y’agyina mmerantee oo me kuro mu mmarima papa bi,
Y’agyina mmerantee y’gyina yen.

Translated into English thus:

We have nurtured the young men,
We have nurtured the young men of our village
We have nurtured them to become powerful men.

The word *agyina* in the song, according to Aning, goes to support the claim for the former name as *Agyina* or *Amannyina* as recollected by Maame Afua.

Traditional Organization of *Nnwonkoro*

Nnwonkoro, as already mentioned, is a musical type performed by elderly women’s groups in Asante, Brong Ahafo and the Eastern Regions of Ghana. Membership, which is voluntary, is open to any woman who is interested. Traditionally, it was performed by women on moonlight nights after a hard day’s work to entertain themselves. The women gathered by going round houses calling each other to come out for a performance. When

they had all assembled they would sing the following song using each other's name:

Mommra oo mommra m'yengoro mommra m'yengoro
Mommra mommra m'yengoro mommra m'yengoro
Abasa Kramo ee mommra oo
Abasa Kramo akofre onua Baayie aye, ehwe enhwe oo aye
Eno Baayie ee Abasa Kramo akogoro oo
Ee mommra oo mommra oo agye yee

Translated into English thus:

Come, come let us play
Come, come let us play
Abasa Kramo come
Abasa Kramo has gone to call her sister Baayie
Eno Baayie, Abasa Kramo have gone to play
Come, come, come

By this time the men would have come around to watch the women perform, so immediately the above song ends they would sing the song below to acknowledge the presence of the men. The men in appreciation would shower money on them and this was used to purchase salt and shared among themselves.

Y'agyina mmerantee ee ee y'agyina mo
Y'agyina mmerantee ee me kuro mu mmarimma papa bi
Y'agyina mmerantee ee ee y'agyina yen.

Nwankoro was also performed at funerals of a deceased member. It was sung to laud and honour loved ones, relations, prominent living or dead personalities of a locality. In singing such songs, names are usually mentioned and it is common to see a performer in a squatting position or hear a complimentary remark such as *mo abrao* (well done) in favour of a particular name mentioned.

Although it was originally meant for pleasure one must not lose sight of the fact that the textual content did not always reflect happiness. It was also sung to express disappointment, criticism, bitterness, resignation or insult and as already indicated death is also mentioned. As a song of

insult, rivals would usually sing to make snide remarks about each other or cast insinuations showing no anger. Significantly, once the performance was over the quarrel ended and no one had a grudge against the other.

Structural and Melodic Organization

Performers stand in a circle and take turns in leading the songs accompanied by handclapping. After an introductory song in free rhythm, *aho*, then follows handclapping in a particular structured rhythm introduced by the leader. When the handclapping is firmly established the leader then begins the main verse of the song which is responded to by the other members in a chorus, and the chorus may break into two or three parts. This continues with each member taking turns in leading the verses of the songs. The leader at a particular moment may sing a new verse or a variation or even begin a new song if she feels a song has been prolonged. A round of songs performed is ended on the accord of members. The performance of another such round only, begins with *aho*, song in free rhythm.

As many other Ghanaian or African traditional songs, *Nnwonkoro* is structured in the form of solo and chorus. This means that one person sings up to a point and all the others respond. There are two main types:

1. The solo section may be different from the chorus and forms a verse or unit of the song. The chorus thus becomes a regular response for subsequent verses.
2. The solo and the chorus may be similar in the sense that the chorus is an exact repetition of the solo or repeated with a slight modification by changing a couple of notes here and there. Both forms are at liberty to introduce variations. A chorus response may be delayed until after two or more shorter responses have been made to the solo lead (see Appendix Fig.1).

Where a solo and chorus are similar, the solo may sing the top part of the chorus response or choose to sing the second part. It is actually a matter of style, which depends entirely on the individual.

Eg. t t d t l
s s l s f
s s s m f

This shows the flexible nature of form in African musical usage.

The melody is directed by the natural tonation and rhythmic pattern of the text. The melodic range therefore rarely exceeds an interval of a 5th. The melody mostly consists of leaps of 3rds and 2nds and scalewise movements usually appearing towards the end of a phrase. Appendix Fig.2 below shows the melodic range, and the melody, which is constructed within E and B (an interval of 5th) throughout the music with a leap of a 4th occurring only twice.

Since the melody depends on the natural tonation of the text, a song may start and end on any note. However, the most commonly used beginnings, are, tr, tl, td, ld, ls, dr, mf, and the common cadential endings are, fs, ls, lmf, srr, rd, lm.

Accompaniment and Movement

Traditionally, handclapping is the only form of accompaniment, and the handclap pattern emphasizes a triple rhythmic effect, another characteristic feature of African music (as shown in Appendix Fig.3).

There is no form of instrumental accompaniment whatsoever. Singers or performers form a circle and clap hands as they sing, swaying the body back and forth to the admiration of on-lookers. Although there is movement of the body, the feet remain in place. According to Nketia (1963), "it is more of a stylized performance mannerism than the dance proper (*asa*) as understood by the Akan and not as conceived in choreographic art".

Since *Nwfonkoro* is performed in a leisurely manner it is sung at a comparatively slow pace, nevertheless in the course of performance momentum may be gathered and speed is increased while singing and clapping gets louder. This may be due to three factors:

1. As a result of reference made to a particular name or to a favourable statement arousing interest

2. Due to changes in clapping patterns which occur at points where performers clap more vigorously and
3. On noticing slackened enthusiasm, an individual could arouse it by clapping louder herself.

Handclapping may start just before or just after the beginning of the song with a basic pattern which is known to all performers. This may be changed to a number of variants after a few bars by some while the rest continue with the basic. Sometimes they would all clap the variant and this practice continues throughout the performance.

(See clap patterns in Appendix Fig.4).

Creativity/Innovation

Considering the performance of *Nnwonkoro* in the past, *Nnwonkoro* as performed now appears to have undergone a great deal of transformation.

Nketia (1969) rightly states that, "Although known skills and repertoire were passed on from generation to generation, the task of the individual did not lie in reproducing what he learnt but also in re-creating it or adding to it". Maame Afua Abasa for example in her early youth could create her own words, which she set to known tunes, sometimes with variations. Much as the text of *Nnwonkoro* is still centred around praise and honour, criticism, disappointment, bitterness and death, there are such new trends based on religion and philosophy. Thus Maame Afua Abasa set the pace by setting religious text to traditional tunes which are conveniently and effectively performed in church. She recalls that during a conference of World Council of Churches in Kumasi, various religious groups and Manhyia Tete *Nnwonkoro* (a traditional group) were invited to entertain delegates. When the Manhyia Tete *Nnwonkoro* got on stage to perform, Maa Afua introduced the song in traditional style with religious words, and suddenly the room was filled with reverential atmosphere. Consequently, after the performance the group was called back for more of such songs. The high standard of performance of this group thus raised peoples opinions about the group. Other texts are composed to caution or advise society in diverse ways for example, songs to caution drivers about

unprofessional behaviour, songs on social vices and so on. Quite a number of the new groups compose songs in this direction.

Nnwonkoro, which used to be traditional music performed only in the villages by elderly women in the past in the evenings, now plays a very important role in urban areas and is performed any time of the day. It was a 'loose' group with no identifiable name nor any permanent membership in the past. Its only exclusivity was gender based. Membership, which has become permanent, is no longer restricted and instrumental accompaniment has found a place in the performance of *Nnwonkoro*. Manhyia Tete *Nnwonkoro* group, now led by Maame Afua Abasa, was the first to make use of such improvisations and has been followed by other *Nnwonkoro* groups.

Membership and Leadership Roles

Membership, which is now permanent, is open to both men and women young and old who have the love for such music. A register is kept, rehearsals are held on regular basis on selected days, and performance by a group is by invitation or in a competition with other such groups. However, every member has her or his own occupation and performs *Nnwonkoro* as a hobby.

There appear to be two main reasons for the inclusion of men as members. One is the introduction of the large ensemble of musical instruments. In Ghanaian musical practice generally women do the singing in mixed groups. Where they are involved in playing instruments they are usually assigned those that play very simple rhythms, while the men take on the instruments that play the more complex rhythms. Thus in *Nnwonkoro* performances women play *frikyiwa* (castanets) and all other instruments are played by the men. They also carry and arrange the instruments and chairs and get the place ready for the performance. An equally important but less obvious reason for the inclusion of men, according to Aning is that, in the Ghanaian or African society it is the man who gives support to the needs of the woman both physically and spiritually. He supports this with the Akan proverb (*obaa to etuo a ode twere obarima dan mu*), if a

woman buys a gun she keeps it in a man's (her husband's) room. Membership of men is therefore seen as fulfilling this traditional social function. These men generally play the role of the overall leader and patron of the group. The patron makes no contribution musically, but he is seen as a counselor in times of need and appears at performances as a source of encouragement.

Not only is Maame Afua Abasa the leader of the group established in about 1946, but she is also the lead singer and has an assistant. Only the two of them take turns in leading the verses with the chorus response occurring regularly as required. Where the *aho* precedes the main verse it is sung in two parts, and the verse is also sometimes sung in two parts before the chorus response in two or three parts.

Contemporary Contextual Performance

Nwfonkoro has changed its direction of performance and is now performed in new contexts. This is due to the many attractions of various popular musical groups, such as gospel music groups and highlife music groups that engage people's attention, leaving no time for the performance of *Nwfonkoro* for fun. However, *Nwfonkoro* is now popularly performed at many functions – at durbars during festivals, private parties, political functions, and even in churches, in addition to funerals as in the past. It has also become an economic venture with groups engaged to perform for individuals (at some of the functions listed above) who are able to meet the requirements of the group. Competitions are also organized for *Nwfonkoro* groups. All such groups are thus well organized and disciplined, and each has a name by which it is identified.

Nwfonkoro is now performed with instrumental accompaniment, and this has given birth to dancing to this kind of music. There is actual dance movement involving the body, arms and feet.

Instrumentation and Accompaniment

The inclusion or incorporation of instruments in the performance of *Nwfonkoro* is a remarkable departure from the tradition of *Nwfonkoro*.

All *Nmwonkoro* groups have a full instrumental ensemble made up of the following instruments – *Frikyiwa* (iron castanets) *tontonsansan* (double bells) *prenprensua* (big sanza or hand piano) *apentema* and *petia* (drums). Before the standardization of the instrumental ensemble, various instruments were introduced and eliminated. The first ever instruments to be introduced were *tonkatonka* (cigarette tin) and *adenkum* (stamping idiophone). These together produced a drum-like effect and were played by the women to accompany their singing. *Adenkum* is made from a gourd with a long neck. Both ends of the gourd (tip and base) are opened and the tip is cupped by the hand to produce varied tones when played. Tones are produced by hitting the bulbous end against the thigh, the arm or elbow or slapped with the fingers. Later, bamboo stumps, also played by the women were introduced to replace *tonka-tonka*.

According to Maa Afua Abasa, when the Asantehene at the time, Nana Osei Agyeman Prempeh II, heard about this group he invited them to perform for him. He was so thrilled by their performance that he fell in love with the group and immediately adopted them as one of the musical groups in his palace. The group thus became responsible for performing for Nana Prempeh at various stages of his daily life on a regular basis. For instance, when it was time for Nana to rise out of bed or to get ready for his meal the appropriate music was performed accordingly. On his request, recordings of the group's repertoire were made for him. He enjoyed the music in his moments of relaxation. Now on realizing that Nana Prempeh was enthused and willing to dance, it became necessary for the inclusion of some kind of drum music to enable him to dance. As a result the bamboo stumps were eliminated and other instruments were introduced in addition to the *prenprensua*. The Kete rhythm was also adopted to accompany the singing to which Nana Prempeh danced.

Conclusion

There is evidence of contemporary practice extending the form of accompaniment and movement employed in music, although some former usages still enjoy popularity.

The fact that a women's group has been given the chance to participate in state affairs is quite an impressive development and no mean achievement. Another interesting thing is that even though what Maa Afua Abasa has created is quite modern, everybody looks at it as being a very old tradition. How did she achieve that? It is the lyrical form which she has stuck to which is associated with ancient traditions. She is seen in society as a highly dignified person who can find her way into the highest ceremonies in the society and the state culture. Apart from that, she has imparted this traditional knowledge to schools, and the Roman Catholic churches.

It is important to state that now there are stars of *Nnwonkoro* who are young. Maa Afua has actually achieved something that is going to live on. She has been able to add to or create a female classic. The reason why she is so popular is that people feel emotionally drawn to her music as "classical" Asante music, because the same tune can be used with different texts depending on the context. She can just compose on the spur of the moment using an already existing tune. Therefore, in her life time, the form which started off in a simple call and response going round the circle with everybody taking turns has moved from that to all these innovations in over forty years. Certainly, she has contributed immensely to the survival and popularity of this musical type by institutionalizing *Nnwonkoro* as an Akan musical form – ancient and modern.

Maame Afua Abasa has indeed been recognized for her efforts. She has twice been given awards by the state and the Asanteman has also given her an award. In addition she has a certificate from the World Council of Churches, and a certificate for performing at the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1984.

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APPENDICES

Fig.1 SOLO

Chorus

(Nketia)

A-yiremo-bi bee-ma mm mm!

A-yiremobi Na-na' SE-e' n'abra ma

yEn go roe! A-yiremo-ki Na-na'Sz-e n'abra ma

yEn gor'o o — Ee-3-Saa nae — 7 Gye man wo nuro

Fig. 2 SOLO I

(Nketia)

yeebi deee me nae oo me nye

nkonke ra' bi deee mende oo- M-ye do -'nua!

