

# NICODEMUS KOFI BADU, HIS BIOGRAPHY AND EXPLOITS IN THE UTILIZATION OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC ELEMENTS IN CHORAL COMPOSITIONS

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Abstract



This paper exposes Nicodemus Kofi Badu as one of the relatively younger generation Ghanaian Choral Music composers. It is projected as a spotlight into his family and educational background, musical endeavours as well as titles and awards he had won. This information built up in the paper was conducted through interview with Kofi Badu himself. In addition I collected his pieces and studied to ascertain the fact that he can be characterized a younger generation composer who has utilized traditional music elements in his choral works. It is palpable among other things that Nicodemus Kofi Badu belongs to the third generation of Ghanaian Choral Music composers. This implies that he has received training from the first and the second generations and has incorporated what he learned in his works to make him distinct from his contemporaries. The paper closes that, in order to come out with much music theory related to African art music, research works must be conducted on more composers of diverse styles in Africa/Ghana

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## Introduction

Omojola (1987), a Nigerian scholar asserts that Nigerian contemporary art musicians include all those that are trained in the universities and conservatories, both home and abroad, writing works which are conceived along the lines of European music but which often employ a considerable degree of African elements. One of the important objectives of these composers is to create a modern tradition of Nigerian art music



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of Western and African features for the comprehension of the local audiences. One of the most important land marks of Badu is that choral works which are fully embedded with traditional musical elements are frequently performed at National music festivals and competitions.

This paper then discusses the biography of Nicodemus Kofi Badu and delve into his background and general compositional style with relation to three of his songs: *Woanana anyewo se?* (Who is like you?), *KatakyiNyame Bra* (Come mighty God) and *Mara nyemara* (I am that I am), which were modeled along the lines of traditional music

The idea that these songs carry traditional elements appeals to choral directors, who have performed the songs repeatedly with their choirs at the National Theatre, British Council Hall and or performance auditoriums. This is similar to what happened to Ndubuisi's choral and operatic works which were performed oftentimes in Nigeria as observed by Njoku: "Since the early 1970s Ndubuisi's opera and choral works have received repeated performances, both in the Arts Theatre and in the Auditorium of the Music Department at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka (U.N.N)" (Njoku 1997, p.11).

According to James Armaah,<sup>1</sup> at a concert which presented Badu's songs, at the British Council Hall on 14th August 2010 the audiences claim the songs were within their comprehension, and they appreciated Badu's style of writing. I argue that these audiences expressed appreciation for Badu's songs because of the inherent traditional *asafo* elements like scooping and spoken texts. These elements seem so natural as if they had listened to indigenous *asafo* music.

## The Early Years of Nicodemus Kofi Badu

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Nicodemus Kofi Badu, born at AgonaAsafo in the Central Region of Ghana on the 15th of August 1947, was his parents' tenth born, hence his surname Badu<sup>2</sup>. His father, though a peasant farmer, was also a brass band music instructor and a leading trumpeter. According to Badu, his mother was a well-known Ebibindwom cantor<sup>3</sup> whose performances in the church and elsewhere always thrilled her spectators. It is a step in the right direction that Badu is a skilled musician. He followed in the footsteps of his parents and developed his musical talents. In 1960, his parents moved from AgonaAsafo in the Central Region of Ghana and lived at Bibiani<sup>4</sup>

### Development of his Musical Talent

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He started the elementary school at age seven (1962) at Bibiani Anglican School. According to Badu, when he was a pupil in class three and a member of the school choral group, he was invited by the head teacher to meet with him and the music teacher at his office after the school's singing rehearsal period. At the meeting, the head teacher revealed that the music teacher said he was a talented alto singer. Thus the head teacher wanted to seek Badu's opinion and that of his parents about enrolling him in the church choir. Eventually, he was made a member of the church choir. This effort by the school authority, making him a chorister, unearthed and allowed for the development of the musical prowess in him. He then developed such love for singing that he joined another singing group, the "Minstrel" choir, a choral group at Bibiani. So alongside his schedule to serve his parents, he attended rehearsals regularly and performed his religious duties, believing that "the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom," a philosophy he made his guiding rule and still treasures today.

After completing his standard seven year education, managing domestic life became difficult as his parents could not afford to pay for higher education. He therefore sought employment with the State Gold Mining Company in Bibiani in 1962 and was gainfully employed as a truck boy at the worksite. After working with this mining company for some time, he decided to abandon this mining job to seek a better life, mainly because the job was not lucrative and did not permit Anglican church and the "Westminster" choirs. According to Badu, the "Westminster" choir was very popular and powerful in the field of choral music him to practice his art of teaching songs which he had learnt informally from directors of the choirs he joined.

In 1968 he moved from Bibiani to stay with a relative at Tamale in the Northern Region of Ghana. Though life was not easy, he did begin to sing again. He enrolled in the Tamale Anglican church and the "Westminster" choirs. According to Badu, the "Westminster" choir was very popular and powerful in the field of choral music performance in the early 1970s. His active involvement in these two groups perhaps paved the way for his appointment as a pupil teacher<sup>6</sup> at the basic school because a few education officers who were members of the groups saw how he sang with zeal. In 1974, the leader of the Westminster choir gained admission to the National Academy of Music, Winneba<sup>7</sup> and left the leadership position vacant. The leadership of the choir therefore asked Badu to take his place because the authorities considered him ready and capable of teaching songs.

In 1978, he gained admission to pursue a programme leading to a four-year teacher training certificate "A" at Bimbilla Training College in the Northern Region. As a talented singer, he joined the college choir when he went there for his studies. The absence of the Music Master in one of the routine choir rehearsals of the college choir permitted Badu to take the initiative to teach a Negro Spiritual entitled "Go and Sin No More" arranged by Jester Hairston. His willingness and ability to teach a song within four weeks of his arrival on campus caught the attention and admiration of the entire student population as well as the tutorial staff. The staff was impressed by this performance and was encouraged to appoint him to the position of second student choirmaster of the college. Realizing that Badu had no knowledge in the theory of music and could not interpret anything on paper, the Music Master paid special attention to him. He offered him extra tuition to prepare him adequately in music fundamentals. This was the same period during which Badu was introduced to the keyboard and to other subjects to prepare him to write the School Certificate Ordinary level Examination towards an admission to the National Academy of Music. In effect, by the time he completed the Four-Year Teacher Training Education, he had also obtained passes in History, Music, Mathematics and English at the School Certificate Ordinary Level.

After completing his Teacher Training Education, he continued to seek to increase his knowledge in music. He therefore contacted Charles Bernard Wilson, the Central Regional Music Organizer and a part time staff member at the National Academy of Music. Wilson readily offered Badu a direction and gave him some books on Rudiments and the Theory of Music to help him work towards admission to the Academy of Music. This offer of books and sense of direction provided Badu with rudimentary knowledge in music and helped him make significant progress in his acquisition of music knowledge. From studying these books he learned more about some of the Classical composers, their compositional techniques and their style of instrumentation.

## First Composition with Traditional Music Elements

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The first attempt Badu made to compose with traditional music elements was to participate in a composition contest organized by Charter Secretariat, which required competitors write a national patriotic song. He presented his song entitled *Nee Gom* (Awake) in which he utilized traditional singing styles like yodeling and spoken texts of the people of the Northern Region. He had studied the Dagbanilanguage of the people of the North since the period he had lived there as a student at Bimbilla Training College. This was the same period he enrolled in Tamale Anglican Church and the Westminster choirs, and by his close association with colleague students and choristers, learned to communicate and to write in the Dagbanilanguage. As part of the contest, the song was performed. His submission was chosen as the winning composition of the contest. His ability to emerge victorious in this contest gave him the encouragement to continue to write in that dimension, using traditional music elements. As a native of the Fanteland he started exploring the musical elements in *asafo* music and *mmoguo* songs and began to use them in his compositions so that he could compose for people of his ethnic background.

His success at the writing of compositions using traditional music elements was a result of effective instruction he received in compositional techniques class at the National Academy of Music, Winneba, when he enrolled in 1985 to pursue a Diploma in Music Education. In the academy the compositional techniques he applied in his works, especially the use of traditional music elements to blend effectively with western harmonic techniques, were received from music scholars such as Robert Manford, Cosmas W.K. Mereku, Charles Bernard Wilson, Gilbert Berese, Eric Beeko, Pascal Amuzu among others. This was the period when syllabuses of educational systems were changed to reflect the traditions of Ghana, and for composers to situate their works in that respect rather than to rely on western compositional elements.

In singing competitions, choirs are required to present an optional item and for choirs to meet such a requirement, according to Badu, many choirs have consulted him to write a test piece for them. He had since written his works using traditional music elements. On hearing Badu's song, one does not have to be told the source of the traditional music elements he explored. One will experience the traditional musical traits of *asafo*, musicspoken texts and scooping effects, as well as realize the melodic structure of *mmoguo* as a guiding technique. In these, he has tried to blend these traits effectively with western harmonic idioms.

## Life as a Choirmaster/Director of Music

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From his early youth days, after his Diploma education, Nicodemus Kofi Badu has been teaching songs to church choirs, school choirs as well as community choral groups on contract. This made him unofficial or guest choirmaster for many singing groups and church choirs since he temporarily handled the choirs. This appointment usually ended at the close of the event for which he was contracted. In all these choirs he directed, he taught some of these “*asafo* compositions,” the compositions in which he has explored *asafo* elements. These songs thrilled most audiences to the extent that a number of choirs craved to have him as a choirmaster. Some of the groups who were lucky to have him were Sekondi Vocal band, Irani Brothers’ Staff Choir, Tema, Asafo Methodist Church Choir, Emmanuel Methodist Church Choir (Swedru), AgonaSwedru and AshaimanMozama Disco Christo Church Choir.

I observed that his compositional technique presented him as unique, especially in the Central Region where no composer competed with him in the writing of musical pieces using traditional music elements from *asafo*. In the Association of Methodist church choirs, Ghana, appointment or election of music directors is dependent on a musician’s ability to prepare and present choirs to conferences and to emerge victorious at singing competitions. Badu’s ability to present choirs and perform with credibility therefore earned him a higher office in the Methodist church as the Director of Music for Swedru circuit of the Winneba diocese of the Methodist Church, Ghana, after which he was elevated to the highest office in the diocese as the Director of Music for the same association. Currently, Badu is a consultant to the Cultural Unit of Ghana Education Service, Central Region, and resident in his village, AgonaAsafo near Swedru.

## Musical Style and Characteristics

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Badu’s composition is generally characterized with proverbs and other traditional music elements, especially from *asafo*. He perceives God as an omnipotent and writes his texts in that perspective. I believe he writes his texts first, and sets music to it, for his melodies to flow like the spoken word. His harmonies are a blend of both Western and African styles. He writes using varied textural densities to “paint” the performance of the traditional musical elements he explores. He additionally creates a form for his pieces with respect to performance situations of the traditional elements he uses.

The lyrics of Nicodemus Kofi Badu’s compositions center upon the greatness of God. The titles of some of his compositions make this assertion factual. The titles *Woanana*]nyeWo

se? (Who is like you?), *Mara nye Mara* (I am that I am), and *KatakyiNyame bra!* (Come! Mighty God) are enough evidence of this.

In most of his writings, and especially the three I have mentioned, he has explored numerous wise sayings, proverbs and indigenous vocabulary all to depict the greatness of God. The parents being Christians (Methodists) might have given him the appreciation of God. He might also have experienced the wonders of God as a Christian. The use of words and phrases like *MpitiprimMpatapram* and *EmintsiminimNyamenyew*, which do not have exact English translations other than to say they express the greatness of God, are examples of phrases he uses throughout his works. As I study his works and consider at which point in his life he may have learned those proverbs and appellations of God, I am unsure where and how he learned these traditional appellations that seek to evoke the greatness of God. When I interviewed him, the response he offered was that he listened to live performance *asafo* music during the days he spent in Winneba for his Diploma in Music Education and he informally learned from the *Asafo* cantors. He took time to visit the *TuafoAsafo* Company and listened to them. Upon my consideration of a number of compositions I have listened to, I conclude that if there is one Fante composer who has written extensively using indigenous traditional elements involving appellations and proverbs, then it is Nicodemus Kofi Badu.

This is very close to compositions of Nigerian, Zimbabwean as well as other Ghanaian composers who show originality in the treatment of melodies using proverbs, as Njoku points out:

One is tempered to liken his treatment of tunes to what happens when if necessary, Igbo proverbs need explanation. Such explanations usually require more elaborate commentaries and longer sentences than the proverbs. With songs, however, it is easier to experiment with tunes than with text. Tunes are more malleable. (Njoku 1997, p.26)

It has been said earlier of Badu's trait of an elaborate use of text rather than proverbs. This is likened to what Njoku expresses of Nigerian and Zimbabwean composers.

As found commonly with traditional African songs, Badu has repeatedly stressed God's greatness to his audiences. In *Woanana*]nyewo s[ this theme/title is repeated several times from the opening of the song until the end. In a similar manner, *Mara nye Mara* and *KatakyiNyame bra* are repeated throughout. In other songs of Badu, repetitions are commonly found. This has been asserted by Agordoh as a feature which is inherent in African traditional music as "Amu is repetitive-repeating the same word, phrase or

sentence several times, which is an essential part of traditional African music.” (Agordoh 2004, p.110) Agawu on another facet says this about repetition:

Order emanates from repetition, and [it] is from doing the “same thing” over and over again that the Northern Ewe find meaning in life. Ritual orders both “life” and “art.” Repetition gives Northern Ewes assurance of the known and the familiar, enables them to take stock of what has been achieved, and provides a forum for creative interpretation and reinterpretation of culture. (Agawu 1995, p.23)

Such has been the style of Badu to ensure that there is meaning in what he wants to communicate to his audiences. Another common feature is engagement of unison, or duplication of melodies in octaves. In Badu’s works this approach emphasizes the singing style of *asafo* and, for that matter, Akans from where Badu originated. In western terms, polarity is a form of unison singing. In the three selected songs and other songs of Badu, the feature of polarity is predominant, especially at the beginnings of the works. Badu employs the Western style in the use of call and response; transforming a traditional music element and blending with harmonic ideologies, he writes five parts: a tenor/alto solo against SATB. In the traditional set up, music making has been primarily call and response but confined to solo against two parts in either thirds, or sixths. This has been likened to the performance of the dirge, as Agawu puts it as “the standard form of the dirge follows the traditional call and response pattern. A lead singer intones the call or introductory segment (A), to which the chorus responds (B). The A-B pattern is then repeated a number of times; the dirge usually ends with B.” (Agawu 1995, p.77)

Following the convention in melody writing in Africa, making sure the melodic organization reflects the speech contour, Badu has achieved notable results. He has been very sensitive to this principle so that the meaning of the words and phrases of his songs can be communicated accurately when sung to his audiences. This frequently results in the use of spoken words in his compositions. *Woanana* [nyewo s], *Katakya Nyamebra* and *Mara nye Mara* have such features in them. This is done to represent the feel of the natural realm of the *asafo* which he explores.

Though Badu wrote many beautiful melodies, with adherence to conventions in African melody writing, one of his more radical innovations compared with his colleagues is forceful, marked and even stark rhythmic patterns throughout his compositions. In particular, his themes are primarily rhythmic rather than melodic.



Badu has transplanted a great deal of *asafo* song features into his compositions, making his words carry many indigenous expressions of *asafo*. I want to emphasize that Badu has written works which are highly evolved and individualized, sometimes with spoken words as in *asafo* songs trying to combine effectively the traditional and the original art. *Asafo*]koeyi h]n, ]fatwitwi a wonnsiw no kwan (*asafo appellations*) are some of the expressions employed to create his own melodies in order to make his pieces sound like *asafo*.

Furthermore, Badu uses chromatic notes either to embellish or modulate to related keys. This reflects his background of having studied western harmonic principles before adapting to traditional music elements. Regarding this, Euba comments:

It is true that [modern African] composers have often attempted to Africanize their works by using Africa tunes and rhythms, but, in their preoccupation with Western forms, such borrowings has been quite minimal and their works must be regarded as extensions of Western art music rather than a continuation of African tradition in music. (Euba 1970, pp.52-3)

However in the case of Badu, his use of western harmonic forms has not overshadowed his compositions. Although he uses chromatic notes and western harmonic forms, his works do not portray a simple extension of Western art music, as Euba asserts has been the practice with many African modern composers. It is important also to mention Badu's contrapuntal style. In each of Badu's extensive works, he has written a section or more in polyphonic texture. This brings to light his efforts to display a compositional ability and to write in all kinds of textures at the same time, depicting a traditional performance style which results in different melodic lines performed simultaneously. A sectional outline of his pieces demonstrates Badu distributing the sections to the various kinds of music textures that are used, most often devoting the early sections to monophony, middle sections to homophony to be followed with polyphony or contrapuntal effect and conclude with homophony alongside call and responses.

## Conclusion

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Nicodemus Kofi Badu is a one of the younger generational art choral music composers who has done extensive choral works exploring traditional musical elements. He has exhibited very palpably the *asafo* performance trend in his works. Badu's desire to apply traditional music elements in his choral compositions was encouraged by his participation in a choral composition contest in which he placed first. The urge to

explore further into expanding his horizon in the use of the said element manifested when he enrolled to undertake a course of study at University of Education, Winneba, paving the way to study *Winneba asafo* groups.

As a native of Fante parents he learned proverbs and appellations informally and applied them to biblical situations. He thrilled all and sundry with his compositions and this led to his position as “contract composer” composing songs for church choirs and schools as optional songs for singing competition contests for a token fee. At Winneba, where he earned his Diploma in music, he took advantage of the vibrant *asafo* company in town and learned many *asafo* songs and appellations which he incorporated in his compositions.

An inquiry into Badu’s compositions reveals his imaginative and skillful styles in the use of varied textural layouts in his compositions. Badu never lacked words. He could use several indigenous words in his compositions to show God’s greatness which has been the theme in most of his compositions. His texts are difficult to understand and translate. In his compositions one realizes an effective use of conventional harmony as well as African harmony by his use of prepared chords for modulations and the use of parallel thirds and sixths which is a prominent harmonic trend in Akan songs.

His melodies are comprehensible, edifying and easy to sing because of his ability to apply the principle of tonal inflections to them. He has an economic use of dynamics and I believe this is because he wants directors of music to apply their musicianship in punctuating his compositions with dynamics. He is generous when it comes to form. He has not used any of the conventional forms but makes sure he sectionalizes his pieces to create a form with the varied textures he utilizes.

I suggest that composers such as Badu should be made object of study in our schools. Besides learning to compose in his style, the younger generation would also learn of the indigenous words/phrases and appellations that may fall out of use and become unfamiliar to future generations. This will contribute to promoting the philosophy of *Sankofaism*

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