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Interrogating The Sacred-Secular Binary in Ghanaian Choral Music

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Abstract



This paper examines the determining factors responsible for the idea of sacredness or secularity of a song, the relationship between the sacred and secular, and how the sacred and secular interplay in Ghanaian music. We focus particularly on the sacred and secular binary as reflected in what may be termed 'Ghanaian Choral Highlife', as both choral and highlife music initially emerged as distinct sacred and secular musical categories respectively. The research methodology in this work involves data from both primary and secondary sources including interviews, musical works and libraries. The musical elements of selected compositions are analysed, and compared to ascertain their relationship, areas of similarities and differences. Major findings in this study reveal the close relationship between the sacred and the secular in Ghanaian music and how both musical genres influence each other. It also reveals how this influence transcends into Ghanaian Choral

Highlife music. Based on our findings we argue that Choral highlife has come to stay as a result of the relationship between the sacred and secular, that is, between Ghanaian choral music and Ghanaian highlife music.

Keywords: Sacred, Secular, Ghanaian, Binary, Highlife, Popular

Introduction

For years, distinguishing between the secular and sacred in Ghanaian popular and choral art music has been problematic. This is because the idea of sacred and secular in the Ghanaian musical scene is in constant negotiation and renegotiation. Given the European school-church dualism in music education in Ghana, what are the distinguishing factors between the sacred and the secular Ghanaian choral music compositions? How is the idea of the sacred and the secular contested or mediated in Ghanaian choral music? However, before going deep into this discussion, it should be clarified that the idea of a relationship between the Sacred and Secular in Ghanaian music, specifically Ghanaian Choral Music is not a new phenomenon. Choral works of such kind have existed since the first half of the 20th century, however, describing this relationship as presented as a novel idea in this work.

Before delving into issues around the sacred and secular binary in Ghanaian Choral Music, it will be appropriate to define what choral music is, in order to further understand this interrogation. According to Randel (2004), choral is music written to be sung by chorus or choir with or without accompaniment. Choir or chorus represents body of singers who perform together either in unison or in parts, usually with more than one singer on a part. A body of church singers is a choir, a term also sometimes used for a secular chorus. Other names for secular chorus include glee, club, choral society and chorale. The chorale is also a hymn tune, especially a slow and stately one, originally intended for congregation singing in the Lutheran church. It can also be defined as a piece of music based on chorale tune or in a style reminiscent of traditional Lutheran church music. The third definition which is the premise of this work states "chorale is a singing group that specializes in singing, especially items pertaining to the church without accompaniment" (Randel, 2004, p172). In this work therefore we refer to choral music whenever we make reference to choirs. Choirs employ Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass (SATB), Tenor, Tenor, Bass, Bass (TTBB), Soprano, Soprano, Alto, and Alto (SSAA) and Soprano, Soprano Alto (SSA) harmonisation.

The definition of choral music we employ aids in distinguishing between choral music and contemporary music.

The theory of Hybridity is applied in this paper. Our preference for this choice of theory aims at understanding the merging of sacred and secular musical elements, and how these elements interact in Ghanaian Choral music. Works by anthropologists Kapchan and Strong (1999), and Stewart (2011) provide an insight into this theory.

In their study, Kapchan and Strong (1999) define hybrid as “a person produced by the blending of two diverse cultures or tradition” (p. 240). Another example of hybridity provided by Kapchan and Strong (1999) is syncretism in Vodoun. Hybridity here, therefore refers to the merging of two or more varying cultures.

Stewart (2011) describes the various words for mixture. Stewart (2011) defines hybridity as “the merging of different elements or systems to form one thing”. Stewart (2011) further posits that, hybridity is “now largely synonymous with mixture” which he defines as the “most generic term for blending of distinctive elements in any sphere” (p. 50). Closely linked to the definitions of hybridity and mixture is syncretism. Syncretism is defined in Stewart’s (2011) study as a term that originally “extends to fusion of idea systems: philosophies, ideologies, ritual practices, science/medicine” (p. 50). As such, in our research, the words hybridity, mixture, and syncretism will be employed interchangeably, because these three terms connote the same meaning.

Nonetheless, in relation to this research, we argue for a new definition to emphasise a better understanding of our study. Hybridity as used in this work defines as the interrogation between sacred and secular musical elements to influence Ghanaian Choral music in the formation of Choral Highlife. Hence, Choral Highlife becomes a hybridisation of both sacred and secular musical elements.

Methodology

Both primary and secondary materials served as sources of data in this paper. Primary sources of data collected included musical examples; Some of the scores include E.P. hymn numbered 101, *Mawu kpe lolo nu blo*, CAN 138 *Ao bra ma yendzi dew*, (Christian Asor Ndwom, the Fante version of the Christian Asor Ndwom) Kontihen’s Aketesia, *Oye adee yie* (He makes things good) Methodist Hymn numbered 110 “Jesu lover of my soul”. Barima Sidney’s *Obiaa nnyε obiaa*

(All are not humans) and the popular gospel song found in Ghanaian Pentecostal churches titled *Wɔntow ayeyi dwom (Sing a praise song)* both musical scores and audio recordings. Semi-structured interviews also serve as primary sources of data obtainment of music scores and audios of selected pieces. Personnel who were interviewed include Stephen Appiah Dankwa, Derrick Ofori and Emmanuel Richard Opoku Bediako. These interviewees were selected based on their incorporation of secular forms into sacred choral music, and knowledge of contemporary Ghanaian musical styles (both sacred and secular).

Secondary sources of data collected include literature on sacred music, secular music, and the relationship between them. These secondary sources were obtained from libraries including the International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD) library at the Department of Music, Balme Library, and the Institute of African Studies (IAS) library, all located at the University of Ghana, Legon. Other sources of secondary data acquisition include archival and internet sources such as JSTOR and Encyclopaedia Britannica.

In all, about twenty songs were collected, and fifteen were sampled. Transcriptions of both sacred and secular songs were made possible in this work. Transcription of files were done with the aid of Finale software. Songs transcribed in this work include the 2001 hit song *Aketesia (Pretty woman)* by Kontihene, and the Methodist Hymn numbered 110 "Jesu lover of my soul". Barima Sidney's *Obiaa nnyɛ obiaa (All are not humans)* and the popular gospel song found in Ghanaian Pentecostal churches titled *Wɔntow ayeyi dwom (Sing a praise song)* are also equally transcribed. In the transcription of the songs *Aketesia* and *Obiaa nnyɛ obiaa*, the songs are played back with the aid of a musical audio player and the melody is notated on the staff using the Finale software. However, with the hymn "Jesu Lover of my Soul" which has already been notated, the melody of the music is notated on the staff with the aid of the Finale software. This transcription process helps in identifying the similarities between these two songs, and further present the link between the sacred and secular in Ghanaian choral music. Both songs were transcribed in the key of G major to make the analysis comprehensible.

Discussion of Findings

2.0. Interrogating the Sacred and Secular Binary in Ghanaian Choral Music

The distinction between the sacred and secular in Ghanaian music poses a problem to both the listener and the performer. Is it the lyrics or the rhythmic patterns employed in a particular musical style that makes it sacred or secular? Where do the two converge and diverge? In answering what makes a particular musical genre sacred or secular, Chang and Lim (2009) opine that Contemporary Christian Music “musicians distinguish between mode and message, or form and content, arguing that modes and forms are inherently neutral tools” (p. 397). The term “mode” or “form” is used as reference to the genre of music, while the “message” or “content” refers to the lyrics employed in such musical genre. Chang and Lim (2009) assert that, “it is the message and the content that defines something as secular or sacred” (p. 397), and not the mode since it (the mode) is not “necessarily secular”. So, making reference of such assertions to Ghanaian music, we argue that, the beat (or rhythmic patterns) from the music does not determine the sacred or secular nature of a particular musical type. Rather, the lyrics, “message” or “content” as Chang and Lim (2009) put it, is what determines the sacred or secular character of a particular musical genre.

Rhythm

Giving examples using the Ghanaian musical front, the same rhythmic elements found in secular Highlife music, are the same that can be found in Gospel Highlife and Choral Highlife music. However, what sets apart the distinction between the sacred and secular nature of the song lies in the text. Making comparing between these songs; *Mansa* by Bisa Kdei, *Mo Ne Yo* by Diana Hamilton, and *Ayeyi Wura* by James V. Armaah, which represent Secular, Gospel and Choral Highlife respectively, although making use of the highlife rhythmic elements, can be distinguished either as Sacred or Secular by their lyrical contents. Other examples including *Susuka* by Kofi Kinaata, *Ntsaase* by Ben Brako, *Obi Nyane mi* by Patience Nyarko, *Oye Nyame* by Stella Aba Seal (nee Dugan), *Praise Highlife* by Newlove K. Annan, and *Idzin No* by James Tsemafo Arthur all provide further evidence of the Sacredness or Secularity of a song being determined by its lyrics and not the Rhythmic elements found in that song. The common Rhythmic structure found in these songs is presented below in Collins (1994) highlife rhythmic styles.

ILLUSTRATION THREE: HIGHLIFE AND TRADITIONAL CLAVE RHYTHMS THE AUTHOR LEARNT THROUGH PLAYING WITH THE JAGUAR JOKERS

Diagram Three: The 'triple off beat' highlife clave rhythm



Or

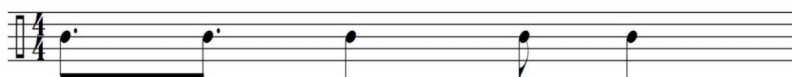
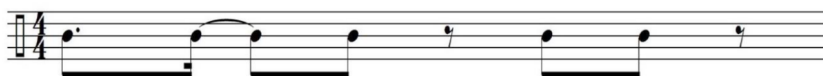


Diagram Four: The imported 'calypso-highlife' clave rhythm



Hence, if the various songs stated above all make use of one/two/all of these three Highlife rhythmic styles presented by Collins (1994), then, the only way to describe these songs either as Sacred or Secular will only be made possible by analysing the lyrics.

Ghanaian musician Cwesi Oteng's song titled *I Win* is described as a "pop music vibe fused with current Azonto and Afrobeats drum" (Cwesi Oteng keeps Winning, 2017). In examining what makes gospel music what it is, Atiemo (2006) opines that, "Gospel music in the Ghanaian context is not defined according to the beat or rhythm. It is the song-text that defines a particular piece of music as 'gospel'" (p. 142). From Chang and Lim (2009) and Atiemo (2006), there is a demarcation between what makes a song sacred or secular, and it is not the mode (beat or rhythm), but rather the message.

Furthermore, one cannot say by fusing Christian lyrics with *Agbadza* rhythm that that particular music formed is traditional *Agbadza* music because of the rhythms used, instead, it is described as a sacred Christian type of music. Mixing Christian rap with hiplife makes such musical style sacred and not secular. The interaction between Ghanaian choral music (sacred) and Highlife (secular) music has led to the emergence of Choral Highlife. Choral Highlife can be defined as Highlife as a hybridised/fused/syncretised/mixed musical genre make up of choral and highlife musical elements in simple duple (2/4) or simple quadruple (4/4) time which is neither choral nor highlife music, but rather both. Choral

and highlife musical elements employed in Choral Highlife consist of Western harmonic progressions for four-part singing, and the basic highlife rhythmic pattern in simple duple (2/4) or simple quadruple time (4/4) with instrumental accompaniments. Instrumental accompaniments however come with their own variations. These rhythmic accompaniments are provided by pre-programmed beats on keyboard synthesisers and also live traditional African drums. In the absence of percussion, keyboard players generate a highlife feel through the rhythms they employ in accompanying Choral Highlife Songs. Nonetheless, Choral Highlife does not solely exist in Ghana but also practiced in Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Togo with some similarities and variations. One of such variations is the singing of hymns in highlife style without syncopated rhythms.

Incorporating the Sacred into the Secular

Over the years, the sacred and secular in Ghanaian music are in constant negotiation and renegotiation. Both choral music and highlife music have had impacts on one another, with either borrowing elements from the other. According to Collins (2004), the coming of the Protestant mission to Ghana came with musical ideas such as Western harmonic progression of I-IV-V. These musical ideas impacted local musical styles and “helped to establish early local popular Highlife dance music idioms such as *asiko* (or *ashiko*), *osibisaaba* local brass band *adaha* music and *palmwine* guitar music” (p. 408). Collins (2004) posits that the first form of highlife music recorded from the Gold Coast in 1928 titled *Yaa Amponsah* makes use of “church harmonies and suspended fourths”.

Furthermore, not only secular highlife music, but also other popular Ghanaian musical forms such as hiplife also borrow from choral music in the exploration of the sacred and secular binary. The tune to Kontihene’s 2005 hit song titled *Aketesia* (pretty lady) can be found in the Methodist hymn book 110 with the hymn title “Jesu Lover of my Soul”.

Jesu Lover of my Soul

Simeon Butler Marsh

Je - su Lo - ver of my soul, Let me to Thy bo - som fly,
5 While the nea - rer Wa - ters roll, While the tem - pest still is high
9 Hide me, O my Sa - vior, hide Till the storm of life is past
13 Safe in-to the ha - ven guide O re-ceive my soul at last.

Example 1: Jesu Lover of my Soul and *Aketesia* (Pretty woman)

Aketesia by Kontihene

A - ke-te-si-a me - se, ma - fa wo la - la - la ε nonti na ma - ba wo hɔ.
5 A - ke-te-si-a me - se, ma - fa wo la - la - la ε no nti na ma - ba wo hɔ. ε
9 hɔ nɔn - sia, me - ba wo hɔ Na me ne wo abɛ twe - twe nkɔ - mɔ
13 A - ke-te-si-a me - se, ma - fa wo la - la - la ε no nti na ma - ba wo hɔ.

Secular hiplife also acquires sacred highlife tunes. The tune to Barima Sidney's *Obiaa nnyɛ obiaa* (*All are not humans*) is a popular song found in Ghanaian Pentecostal churches under the title *Wɔntow ayeyi dwom* (*Sing a praise song*). Also, Samini's song titled *Linda* is also one other sacred popular song found in the church.

OBIA NYE OBIA

Barima Sidney

O - bia nyeo - bia e o - bia nyeo - bia Hey o - bia nyeo - bia Hey o -

4
- bia nyeo - bia. Wo - nyeo bia me nso me nyeo - bia Hey o - bia nyeo - bia Hey o -

8
- bia nyeo - bia Wo - twi benz a me - twi m'a - po - tra - kaa vol - voa me nso me - twi la - re Hey o -

12
- bia nyeo - bia Hey o - bia nyeo - bia wo - wa ban mua me - wo po - si - tion pho - bia, a me - wo fa - bulous

16
Hey o - bia nyeo - bia Hey o - bia nyeo - bia.

AYEYI NWOM

from the
Ghanaian Pentecost Church

Won to, a - ye - yi dwom o - Christ o - re - ba won to, a ye yi dwom o Christ o - re - ba

5
won to, a - ye yi dwom o Christ o - re - ba won to, a - ye - yi dwom o Christ o - re - ba. Ye - be -

9
to a - ye - yi dwom a - ra a - ye - yi dwom a - ra ye - be - to - a - ye - yi dwom oo

13
ye - be - to. Ye - be - to a - ye - yi dwom a - ra a - ye - yi dwom a - ra ye - be - to

17
a - ye - yi dwom oo ye - be - to.

Yε Adeε Yie

Sacred Text Ma - wu fe lo - lo so gbo E - fe Te - mu - vi de - ka
 Secular Text 'Yea - dee yie with his mach - ine went out to do tar - ted clothes

5
 Wo - tso he - ma be - na nye Kpli wo sia mia kpo a - gbe.
 when he start - ed 'yea - de yie peo - ple started to laugh at him.

This lyrics to this Hymn, often sang in highlife style, found in the Hadzigbale was subsequently changed by the Highlife group Dunsin and titled *Oye ade yie*. In making use of this hymn, the group adopted the melody, but however syncopated first beat of each bar by employing a semiquaver rest, or by tying the last beat of the bar to the first semiquaver beat of the next bar. A section of the *Oyeadiyē* extract is presented below.

Oyeadiyē

5

Another example exploring the sacred and secular relationship can be seen in the extract presented below. In analysing the rhythmic and melodic pattern employed, there can be seen no obvious changes. However, the sacredness or secularity of this music can be found in its text. While the sacred text refers to the text in the Evangelical Presbyterian Hymn Book, the secular text refers to a pastor and another person using a washroom at the same location.

Ao bra ma Yendzi dɛw

Sacred Text: Ao bra ma yen - dzi dɛw Se nkan me yɛ hia - nya
 Secular Text: ɔ - so - fo wui yem ya Me nen na - ko tia - fi

a - fei me - nya Nya - me ho doa ɔ - doa ɔ - kyen si - ka.
 ɔ - nea - na ma - ne ta na mata ɔ - so fo wui yɛ me ya.

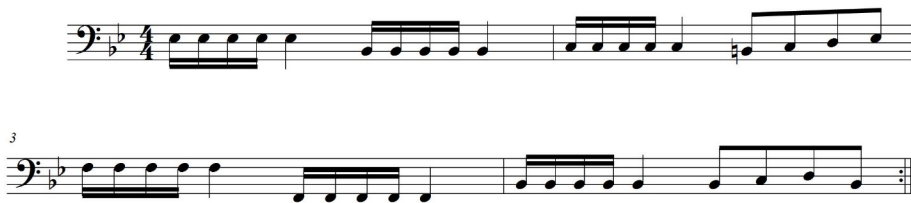
The relationship between the sacred and secular similarly goes the other way with the secular also impacting the sacred such as stated earlier on in the case of Cwesi Oteng’s hit song “I Win”. Sacred Choral Highlife equally borrows from the secular world in terms of instrumentation as will be further discussed in this article, and the adoption of bass patterns from the secular world.

Incorporating the Secular into the Sacred

Stephen Appiah Dankwa, Executive Director and Founder of the Symphonic Kings Boys Choir located on the Presbyterian Boys Senior High School grounds, and a Choral Highlife enthusiast confirms the adoption of bass lines from the secular highlife world. Dankwa (personal communication, March 02, 2017) cites the example of the incorporation of the bass line found in the highlife song titled *Belembe* by Bessa Simons into the Choral Highlife work “Worthy of All Praise” by Newlove Annan. According to Dankwa, Bass lines from the secular world that are adapted into Choral Highlife songs are the ones that:

Conform to whatever they are singing, and in that sense, if there is a line in the secular side or in the pure highlife form which corresponds to the line they are singing, it can be dragged in there. It is a copy and paste affair. (Personal conversation, March 02, 2017)

In other words, Dankwa implies that the bass lines derived from the secular world should be in correspondence to the chordal progression employed in the Choral Highlife work.



Example 1: Bass pattern from *Belembe* used in chorus section of “Worthy of all Praise”

Bɔbɔɔbɔ is a popular traditional musical genre found among the mid Ewe of the Volta Region of Ghana likewise presents the interaction between the sacred and secular in the Ghanaian musical scene. This popular traditional musical type which originated from Kpando, has over the years found its roots into the church. This is as a result of the underpinning indigenization of worship where especially the youth are involved. The traditional musical genre which, in the past, was an abomination to Christian worship now finds its way massively into the church. The most prominent churches where these Bɔbɔɔbɔ groups are found are the Evangelical Presbyterian, and the Global Evangelical Church whose membership is predominantly Ewe. It is worthy to note that effective indigenization, has been carried out by selecting songs with sacred text, and totally avoiding those with secular text. This way, the sacred text fits into Christian worship. In some cases substitution of words have been made to contextualise the song in Christian worship. A few of such sacred bɔbɔɔbɔ songs include:

- *Sefofo nyuiwo soŋ miakpɔ le dzi fo* (It’s all good flowers that we will find in heaven)
- *Dzo Alesi nye Mawu do ɔe menye* (Much fire/spirit as my God has set into me)
- *Manɔ Mawu sinu kpɔm* (I will look up to God)
- *Ne miaɔo dzi fo la* (When we reach heaven)
- Yubilate (Yubilate)

In a couple of instances, hymns are used against the bɔbɔɔbɔ percussion and rhythms which remain that of the bɔbɔɔbɔ setting. Conscious attempts are also, however made to avoid the secular/profane text when the drums are used as text surrogates.

Away from Ghana

Making a comparative analysis, not only in Ghana is there an interaction between sacred and secular, but also in the United States. Chang and Lim (2009) assert that since religion is practiced within a secular society, elements that can be found in the secular society are thence adapted into the sacred in order for religion to “survive in a modern secular age” (p. 394). Chang and Lim (2009) examine the use of secular musical genres, namely hip hop, heavy metal, and punk in sacred music, however with specific focus on the musical group *IX Saves*, a musical group that mixes or syncretises Christian lyrics with contemporary musical forms such as “rock and roll”. According to Chang and Lim (2009), “this creative adaptation can lead to religious vitality and affirmation” (p. 395). Chang and Lim (2009) further opine that it is regular hearing electric bass, amplified guitars and a rock kit drum during an Evangelical church service.

Nonetheless, there has been opposition to secular music from the orthodox churches, with some people including David Wilkerson titling his work *The Devil's Heartbeat: Rock and Roll* (Chang and Lim, 2009). The title of this work speaks for itself. On the other hand, while some churches have openly come out in opposition to this musical style, other churches including the Christian Reformed Church have come out in support of this.

“Within African American music history there exists a long-standing tension between Western ideas about the secular and the sacred and between other cultural sensibilities in which the split is not as profound” (Ramsey, 2003, p. 212). *Jesus Is the Reason* by Kirk Franklin also presents the chance to assess the negotiation and renegotiation between the sacred and secular in the American context, specifically the African-American context. Ramsey (2003) avers that, “*Jesus Is the Reason for the Season*” appeared on the Kirk Franklin and the Family Christmas project in 1995” (p. 211). Ramsey (2003) opines that “Franklin has crafted what might be called a hip-hop-inspired “New-Jack gospel” sound” (p. 215).

Accordingly, Ramsey (2003) postulates that, “*Jesus Is the Reason for the Season* provides an excellent opportunity to discuss some pertinent issues surrounding the idea of spirituality and secularism in African American culture, among other issues during the Age of Hip-Hop” (p. 210). Ramsey (2003) goes on to further argue that, “*Jesus Is the Reason*” provides a musical critique of the perceived boundaries separating sacred and secular life, entertainment and ministry...” (p. 210). By borrowing musical idioms from the secular and hybridising with sacred text, Franklin succeeds in enabling an interaction between the sacred

and secular in his song.

This interaction by Franklin is achieved by setting sacred text to hip-hop or R&B styles, and incorporating secular terminologies, instrumental accompaniments and bass lines into his work. "Moreover, by mixing and matching musical genres with distinct histories, musicians such as Karen Clark Sheard and Kirk Franklin could powerfully critique current ideas about secularism, sacredness, and the intense commercialism that is part and parcel of hip-hop culture" (Ramsey, 2003, p. 215).

Instrumental accompaniments and use of same harmonic progressions in both verse and chorus utilised in Kirk Franklin's song are mostly found and used in secular musical works. In assessing the sacred and secular interaction, Ramsey (2003) notes that, "Instrumentally, the piece sounds identical to any jazz-funk and jazz-rock ensembles, featuring electric bass, drums, and various synthesizer and guitars" (p. 211).

Franklin additionally makes use of other secular musical elements in his piece, such as incorporating secular terminologies including "Stomp", which according to Ramsey (2003), "is based on a sample of "One Nation under a Groove," a hit recording from the secular funk group Funkadelic" (p. 212). Also, bass lines from the secular world are likewise incorporated into Franklin's song. Furthermore, Ramsey (2003) postulates that, Franklin makes usage of phrases found in secular musical work in his song, although he makes minimal changes to it. One of such adaptation of secular phrases is the use of "I Love it when you call me big Papa" by the late rapper known as Notorious B.I.G. Franklin manages to use it in a sacred context although he makes a slight change to the end of the phrase by saying, "I love it when you call him your Savior!".

This research reveals that one cannot simply determine the sacred or secular nature of a song by merely listening to the beat or melody, but rather paying attention to the lyrics employed. The means through which music is made does not determine the secular or sacred nature of a song, but rather the message or lyrics employed in such works. This research has also revealed the negotiation and renegotiation of the sacred and secular in not only Ghanaian choral music, but also Ghanaian popular music, and also American music.

It is recommended for more negotiations between the sacred and secular. The sacred and secular have a long history in the Ghanaian musical scene. This symbiotic relationship can further lead to the hybridisation of choral music and other musical genres including hiplife similar to the merging of choral and

highlife music in order to foster the growth of Ghanaian choral music.

Conclusions

The relationship between the sacred and secular, that is, between Ghanaian choral music and Ghanaian highlife music has enabled the emergence of Choral Highlife. This musical genre is a hybridisation of sacred and secular musical idioms. Although primal focus on this work is on Ghanaian choral music, the sacred-secular binary in Ghanaian popular music is also highlighted alongside the sacred and secular binary in the American context.

Given the European school-church dualism in music education, the distinguishing factor of sacred and secular choral music lies largely with the text. This not surprising because in African traditional music the emphasis is on the text, which is normally influenced or determined by the socio-cultural context including economics, politics, agriculture, health, etc, The rhythm or the mode cannot determine the sacredness or secularity of the piece of music. The idea of sacred and secular can be mediated by the fact that each musical genre could borrow from each other, but will create its identity by the application of the text. This has been elaborated upon in the preceding paragraphs by composers of either sacred or secular music borrowing from each other the rhythm or tunes and applying their message.

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