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Cultural and Artistic Dimensions of E. O. Acquah's Nyansaba Musical Drama

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Abstract



This study explores the cultural and artistic dimensions of E.O. Acquah's Nyansaba within the context of Anansegorndwom (African musical drama with indigenous stories). By drawing on Cultural Theory propounded by Edgar and Sedgwick (2005/2007), the paper analyses how Acquah fuses traditional Ghanaian oral narratives with modern musical techniques, creating a work that bridges the gap between cultural heritage and contemporary composition. The study examines the harmonic structures, rhythmic patterns, and narrative elements in Nyansaba, shedding light on the significance of Ananse stories in Ghanaian culture and how Acquah's work contributes to the preservation of these traditions. The findings underscore the role of Nyansaba as a vital artistic and cultural expression, offering insights into the symbiotic relationship between music and storytelling in Ghana. It is concluded that the interplay of the composer's musical theoretical skills, poetry,

and the Ananse philosophy demonstrates his transformative power of imagination that could become a vehicle for transcending unpatriotic behaviours that can eventually correct the anti-national development attitudes in the Ghanaian citizenry if the musical drama receives the intended patronage.

Keywords: E.O. Acquah, Nyansaba, Anansegorndwom, Ghanaian storytelling, cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

NYANSABA, an African musical drama, is a string of stories about the animal trickster, Kweku Ananse, in the Ghanaian stories. The work brings out the selfish, vindictive, and cruel character of the Spider; and also his function as a symbol of freedom from physical limitations and moral restraints. It is a non-linear composition which is a culturally contextualised African opera that combines four languages in Ghana - Akan, Ewe, Ga and Dagomba. The plot of the work is based on laces of Ananse stories. Characters of the plays were developed from the narratives that featured Ananse's companions (Yaa Ataa, the daughter, Yaa Ahoofɛw, the wife, and Ntsikuma, the adopted son, Tsipolipoli, Big head, etc.). Acquah (2023) gives a simple synopsis of this work:

One day Ananse's daughter Yaa Ataa asks her mother Yaa Ahoofɛw (literally Yaa the beautiful slender one) why the axe that hangs high up on a wall in their house has never been used. Yaa Ahoofɛw says the axe carries a delightful secret that shall be revealed in time. After cajoling and persuading antics from Yaa Ahoofɛw, she recounts the enthralling stories of a greatest folktale hero that ever lived!

Oops! Did I say "lived"? Consider that a slip of my mind because this ubiquitous, unpredictably predictable hero is timeless; he cannot ever die! So, I should have said the greatest folktale hero that ever lives!

Ahaa, that's it! In fact, it is believed, it is said, errrr, they say that Uncle *Owu* (Death) takes to his heels at even the sound of his footsteps, let alone his name!

The story unfolds. (p.12)

E.O. Acquah's Nyansaba (The wise child), published in 2023, is a significant work that blends traditional Ghanaian storytelling with modern musical elements. Positioned within the framework of Anansegorndwom (African musical drama with indigenous stories), a genre rooted in the Ananse storytelling tradition, Nyansaba exemplifies how music serves as a medium for preserving cultural heritage and promoting artistic innovation. Ananse stories, integral to Ghanaian oral traditions, are moral and instructive tales about Ananse the spider, often characterised by cleverness and wit. These stories have been passed down through generations, usually accompanied by music and dramatic performance. Acquah's Nyansaba stands as a testament to the importance of incorporating indigenous cultural elements into contemporary artistic expressions. As the modern world moves towards globalised forms of music, there is an increasing need to safeguard traditional African art forms and adapt them for new audiences. In Nyansaba, Acquah's use of rhythmic complexity, harmonic texture, and narrative integration draws attention to the inherent value of Anansegorndwom as both a pedagogical and artistic tool. This study seeks to explore how Acquah's composition preserves and reinterprets the Ananse storytelling tradition through a detailed analysis of its cultural and artistic components. It aims to highlight the broader significance of the work in Ghana's music landscape. Furthermore, the study seeks to demonstrate how Acquah's integration of traditional and modern musical idioms contributes to the evolving nature of African art music, while simultaneously providing a platform for cultural education and preservation.

2. Theoretical Perspective

The analysis was underpinned by the Cultural Theory propounded by Edgar and Sedgwick (2005/2007). The cultural theory emphasises how cultural practices, like music and storytelling, shape and are shaped by society. In this regard, E.O. Acquah's *Nyansaba* serves as an artistic manifestation of Ghanaian cultural identity, blending indigenous oral traditions with contemporary musical elements. This theory explains how Acquah's work reflects and reinforces Ghanaian culture, including the role of music in preserving and passing on traditional stories. It also examines how Acquah engages with both local and global cultural dynamics in his composition. The theory also provides tools to analyse the structural elements of *Nyansaba*—its rhythm, harmony, and form—while also interpreting the cultural significance of these musical choices. It highlights how Acquah's

Nyansaba interacts with cultural norms, values, and social functions within the story telling tradition in Ghana.

3. Review of Related Literature

Analysis of musical works has long been a subject of academic inquiry, particularly in music composition and performance, where scholars study the nuances of music either absolutely or by referentialism to show how a musical work reflects and shapes the social and cultural identities of communities. Again, how the musical works were composed, bringing out the various elements for re-synthesis. E.O. Acquah's *Nyansaba* draws compositional materials from Ghanaian Ananse storytelling songs and existing indigenous songs, positioning the composition within a broader discourse on the role of oral tradition as source materials for intercultural compositions.

3.1 Ghanaian Oral Traditions

The importance of oral traditions in African music has been extensively studied by scholars such as Nketia (1971, 2017), who underscores the centrality of storytelling in African cultural expression. He explains that music and storytelling in African societies are often inseparable, serving both pedagogical and entertainment purposes. Ananse stories, in particular, are a key cultural element in Ghanaian folklore, conveying moral lessons through narrative and performance (Adjei, 2015). Acquah's Nyansaba taps into this tradition by incorporating elements of these stories. Several scholars have documented the role of Ananse stories in shaping Ghanaian music traditions (Addo, 2013; Aduonum, 1980; Deandrea, 2004; Esseku et al., 2023; Yitah, 2017). Like Acquah (2019) intimates, Anansegorndwom reflects the deep connection between music and oral literature in Akan culture. He is of the view that through performances that blend music, drama, and storytelling, these songs preserve Ghanaian folklore and cultural values. Nyansaba follows this pattern, serving not just as a musical composition but also as a cultural artefact that bridges the past and the present.

Researchers like Agawu (1984) and Agordoh (2005) have examined how traditional Ghanaian music is being adapted in contemporary compositions. These studies point to a growing trend of blending indigenous musical forms with modern techniques, thereby creating a unique musical identity

that resonates with both local and international audiences. Acquah's work aligns with this movement, as he integrates traditional elements into a more modern compositional style.

3.2 Cultural Preservation and Music in Contemporary Ghana

Cultural preservation through music has become increasingly important in the context of globalization, where the influence of Western culture often overshadows indigenous traditions. According to Howard (2016), music is one of the most effective means of preserving intangible cultural heritage, as it encapsulates the values, histories, and social structures of a community. In Ghana, where traditional musical forms face the risk of decline, it is argued that contemporary scholar composers like Acquah play a crucial role in keeping these traditions alive. Again, Ilesanmi (2021), Owusu-Ansah and Acquah (2021) as well as Nketia (1964), all advocate for the fusion of traditional African music with contemporary forms as a means of sustaining cultural relevance. They argue that by adapting indigenous forms to modern contexts, composers can ensure their continued transmission to future generations. Acquah's Nyansaba exemplifies this approach, as it takes a familiar cultural narrative and reinterprets it through the lens of modern composition techniques. This trend reflects a broader cultural phenomenon where African artists draw from their heritage while engaging with global artistic movements. According to Amuah (2013), the challenge for African composers lies in maintaining the integrity of traditional forms while innovating within a modern framework. Music and storytelling are deeply intertwined in many African cultures, where they serve not only as forms of artistic expression but also as tools for transmitting cultural knowledge (Abebe, 2021). This is particularly true in Ghana, where Ananse stories have played a significant role in shaping the moral and social values of communities. In Nyansaba, Acquah uses music as a medium to retell these stories, thereby contributing to the ongoing construction of Ghanaian cultural identity. The relationship between music and cultural identity has been a central focus in ethnomusicological studies, with scholars like Blacking (1995) and Merriam (1962) arguing that music provides a lens through which we can understand the social and cultural structures of a society. In Ghana, where oral traditions are central to the transmission of knowledge, works such as Acquah's Nyansaba plays an important role in keeping these traditions alive. In this regard, its analysis to unravel the various embedded traditional elements in its creation is worthwhile as much as studies of musical analysis within cultural contexts are concerned.

4. Methodology

In approaching the study, musical analysis was used. Musical analysis is the study of musical structure in either compositions or performances (DeVoto. cited in Acquah, 2018). Thus, analysis is the resolution of musical structure into relatively simpler constituent elements, and the investigation of the function of those elements within that structure (Bent, 1994). Analysis is also dependent on what one is looking for in a piece of work (Cook, 1999). The work, which is 254 page-work, was purposively sampled because that is the only musical drama by a Ghanaian scholar composer that dovetails into the use of Ananse stories. In all, the work contains 46 musical pieces stringed together in the story. My aim, therefore, was to unearth the folk materials that were used to create the work within the context of the African society, in line with the cultural theory used in this study. As a result, critical observation was made and bringing out to readers the indigenous materials as well as the traditional compositional techniques used in the novelty. Thus, indigenous compositional devices such as falling tones, spoken texts, polyrhythms, unison, call and response, ebibindwom singing style, scale and modes, voice textural forms, traditional harmonies and adowa dance style were looked for in the work. Other traditional materials analysed from the work included how the indigenous instruments and the folk media were used in the work.

Table 1: Order of Musical Pieces in the Work

S/N	Title of Song	Literal Translation	Medium	Page(s)
1.	Yer'bedzi agor akyerɛ hom	We are coming to entertain you	Cantor, chorus Apatampa ensemble	1-11
2.	Kodzisɛm wɔnngye nndzi	Stories are not believed	Adowa style	13-26
3.	Okom dzem'	I am hungry	Male quartet	27-47
4.	Osika fie	Osika's house	Baritone and soprano duet	48-57
5.	Obunumankoma	Obunumankoma	Cantor and chorus	58-59
6.	Mami ayekoo	Congratulations	Cantor and chorus	60

7.	Yeewie edwuma yε	We have finished working	Male trio	61-65
8.	Adze resa	Darkness is falling	Male solo and chorus	66-73
9.	Hom nkyersw hom dzin	Write your names	Adowa style	74
10.	Hom ntsie hom dzin	Listen to you r names	Adowa style	75-79
11.	Hon nyina	You all	Male voices against female voices	80-96
12.	Awershow ndwom	Song of lamentation	Baritone solo	98
13.	Me yam' hyehye me		Baritone solo	98-103
14.	Afrefre	Calls	Baritone solo with traditional drums accompaniment	104-111
15.	Bisa me	Ask me		112-122
16.	Tsie wo nsohws	Listen to your test	Call and response (Bass and Tenor voices)	123-131
17.	Meda wo ase, mboko	Thank you, I shall go	Solo – agbadza style	132-134
18.	Evua do gbe loo	The dance has announced its presence	Cantor and chorus	135
19.	Owar kyɛn no	It is longer than that	Two baritones – duet	136-140
20.	Nsohwε a odzi kan	First test	Duet	141-151
21.	Nkonyim a odzi kan	First victory	Duet	152-153
22.	Ndowa nsohws	Bees test	Cantor and chorus	154-171
23.	Gyae saa yo	Stop doing that	Chorus	172-173
24.	Agofomba	Performers	Chorus	174-175
25.	Medzen' brebrew	I take it little by little	cantor and chorus	176-178
26	Nkonyim a otsia ebien	Second victory	Solo and chorus	179-180

27.	Kweku na Ansεrwa	Kweku and Anserwa	Duet	181-183
28.	Ananse na Gyataber	Ananse and Lioness	Duet	184-195
29.	Nkonyim a otsia ebiasa	Third victory	Cantor and chorus	196-197
30.	Ayekoo	Congratulations	Chorus	198
31.	Ananse na Yaa	Ananse and Yaa	duet	199-203
32.	Mienya kpona		Chorus	204
33.	Due	Sorry	Cantor and chorus	205-209
34.	Owo akam'	Snake has bitten me	Solo and duet	210-214
35.	Medze no boko	I will take him	Soprano solo and chorus	215-217
36.	Kosε	Sorry	chorus	218-221
37	Agoo mayi afe	Allow and let me go home	Chorus - agbadza	222
38.	Muruwu	I am dying	Solo and duet	223-224
39.	Mboko me fie	I will go to my hhouse	Solo , duet and chorus	225-230
40.	Yε edziban ma me	Cook for me	Solo and duet	231-234
41.	Bra na bedzidzi	Come and eat	Solo and duet	235-236
42.	Munntum mennyε hwee	I cannot do anything	Solo and duet	237-238
43.	Moba hwo ye se		chorus	239
44.	Guar me	Bath me	Solo and duet	240
45.	Nyansa kutu	Wisdom pot	Solo and duet	241-253
46.	Yeyi Asante kotoko	We have chosen Asante the porcupine	Cantor and chorus	254

For the purpose of unravelling specific African features in the work, excerpts from the songs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 11 were purposefully sampled for the analysis. As already indicated, apart from the indigenous compositional devices listed in the methodology, the analysis also encompassed use of indigenous instruments as well as folk media.

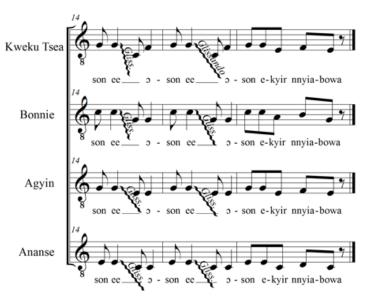
5. Analysis

5.1 Indigenous Compositional Devices Used

Nyansaba (The wise child) is characterised with the elements of African music, dance and folktales within the Ghanaian context. Although Western techniques such as counterpoints, modulations, imitations, fugal expositions, staccatos and cadential extensions were used sparingly in the work, it was predominantly based on African idiomatic styles such as falling tones, use of spoken text, unisons, call and response and *ebibindwom* singing style, rhythms, melodies, use of African modes, voice textural forms and harmonies. Other idioms include African instruments, dance, stories and costuming.

5.1.1Use of Falling Tones

The use of falling tones to depict the tonal inflections of the texts and lay emphasis depending on the context within the setting of the story used in the work was common. The pitch levels of certain spoken texts usually descend and become falling tones. This technique is found in many languages in Ghana and Africa as a whole. In the work, this was denoted with glissando. The following is an excerpt from the work.



Excerpt 1: Falling tones

5.1.2 Use of Spoken Texts

In representing some features of African compositional style, it is sometimes difficult to ensure exactitude of notes juxtaposing particular text in a composition. It can easily be performed but difficult to notate since the text may be well understood by speaking instead of singing in the course of the performance. This is usually rendered spontaneously with varied tones and voice textures as seen in *asafo* music performances of the Akan (Acquah, 2013). This indigenous technique was used to situate appropriately the context of the plot of the story. An example is found in the opening *apatampa* musical performance as illustrated below.



Excerpt 2: Spoken text

5.1.3 Use of Polyrhythm

The work was written in the times of simple duple and compound duple, which were used interchangeably throughout the piece effecting a free rhythm in some of the portions of the work. This is because most songs collected were in either or . It was used in both the accompaniment and the lines of the characters, creating patterns of varied polyrhythmic structures that characterize traditional drumming. The excerpts below show these rhythmic usages.



Excerpt 3: Polyrhythm

5.1.4 Use of Unison

In traditional musical performance of Ghana, two or more musical parts sometimes sound the same pitch or at an octave interval, usually at the same time. There is usually other rhythmic patterns which are homorhythmic and which form the unison. This was found in the work. An example is the excerpt below.



Excerpt 4: Unison

5.1.5 Use of Call and Response

Call and response is predominantly a unique feature in the musical fibre of most traditional music in Ghana. Hickok (1989) is of the view that call and response involves repetition of short melodic phrases. There is usually a cantor and chorus alternating fragments or the whole of the song. This was carefully employed as a compositional technique in most parts of the work. The following are excerpts from the work to exemplify the call and response technique.

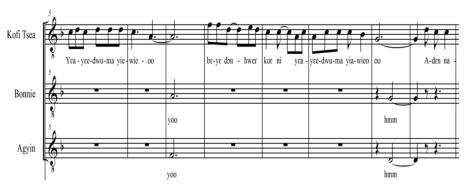


Excerpt 5: Call and Response

It could be seen that there is alternation of dialogue between Ananse and the chorus depicting call and response. This was used when Ananse was mentioning their names written on the paper in anticipation for the food that was being brought from Osika's residence.

5.1.6 Use of Ebibindwom Singing Style

Ebibindwom (Akan sacred lyrics) singing style, which is peculiar to the Akan of Ghana was adopted and used as a technique in some of the pieces. Amuah (2014) observed that Ebibindwom arose from the attempt to set Christian lyrics to existing traditional tunes from some of the existing musical traditions such as Asafo, Adenkum and omps. Similarly, Amuah and Arthur (2013) described ebibindwom as the first authentically indigenous musical style to emerge in the course of the evolution of Ghanaian church music. Notably, it is characterized with call and response as well as cantor and chorus. This technique was used in Act I when the characters had finished working in the farm and were waiting for their food.



Excerpt 6: Ebibindwom Style

5.1.7 Use of Scale and mode

"A scale is an ascending or descending pattern of half and whole steps within the range of octaves (Ferris, 2013, p.40). Pitts and Kwami (2002) also defined a scale as series of pitches arranged in order from low to high or high to low. These arranged pitches may be major, minor or pentatonic (5 tones), heptatonic (7 tones) depending on the number of notes within the scale or the intervallic structure of the successive pitches. Kwami also described mode as a seven-note scale created by starting on any of the seven note of a major or a melodic minor scale.



Excerpt 7: Scale and Mode

Both scales were used in the work. A typical example is the "humming song" Kweku Ananse sang when he had the plan to see Odomankoma to make him a hero of folk tales as shown below a melody in the pentatonic mode.



Excerpt 8: A short humming song depicting pentatonic scale

5.1.8 Use of Voice Textural Forms

There are three basic musical textures namely, monophony, polyphony and homophony (Hickok 1989). Monophonic music consists of a single melodic line with no accompaniment while a musical composition that involves melody in more than one line simultaneously is polyphonic in texture. The resulting combination of pitches produces harmony, but all of the voices are singing a melodic line. On the other hand, when a melody is accompanied by other voices that produce harmony, but that are not primarily of melodic

significance, the texture is homophonic. All these textures are found in the Ghanaian traditional singing and which were adopted in the work.

The work made use of baritones, male chorus, mixed chorus, male trio, female chorus and soprano solos to reveal the theatrical conflicts and the characterization of the plot of the story. The work is unavoidably affected by the thought of these voice textural forms in African indigenous music performance. This creative practice was done to pay attention to the performance of music and the close cooperation between the creation of music and the story.

5.1.9 Use of Traditional Harmonies

Whittall (1999) described harmony as "a simple craft, based on a few rules of thumb, derived from facts of history and acoustics — rules simple to learn and apply..." (cited in Butterworth, 1999, p. xi). Harmony in thirds, particularly with "thirds chains" is found in particular density in a certain region of Africa, including Ghana. The largest patch of harmony in thirds is found in Western Central Africa and comprises most of Angola and South-Western Congo-Kinshasa. Another important section of the thirds area branches off along the West African Coast. This is an observation made by Kubik (1975), cited in Amuah and Acquah (2013). Apart from the thirds, African traditional harmonies are also characterized with the movements of fourths and fifths. Most of the harmonic progressions adhered to some basic harmonics techniques in African indigenous music. Parallel 3rds and 4ths were commonly used while 5ths were used sparingly although conventional harmony dominated the piece with intermittent appearance of atonal harmony. The following shows some excerpts of these progressions.



Excerpt 9: Harmonic Progressions 1



Excerpt 10: Harmonic Progression 2



Excerpt 11: Harmonic Progression 3

5.1.10 Use of Adowa Dance Style

Adowa dance is the most widespread and most frequently performed social musical type of the Akan speaking people of Ghana. It forms an integral part of all vital facets of the life cycle (Anku, 2009). It is performed during naming ceremonies, puberty rites, marriage, religious ceremonies, festivals and other social occasions. Adowa movement patterns as a style were used appropriately in the work blending with a bell pattern and hand clapping in the drama. The following illustrates this style.



Excerpt 12: Adowa Style I



Excerpt 13: Adowa Style 2

The piece reveals the composer's capacity to unify the elements of both the *adowa* music and that of the Western in a more embellished or modernised way.

5.2 Use of Indigenous Instruments

The work made use of Atenteben, gyile, seperewa and atumpan to play specific roles in the unfolding story. The various instrumental set-up of Adowa, Agbadza, Kpanlogo, apatampa and Bamaya were used in the full ensemble at the anansegorndwombuenyim (prelude), anansegorndwomfinimfin (interlude) and anansegorndwomekyir (postlude) which are all strands of Mbogu but atenteben and gyile (xylophone) were used as accompaniment while seperewa and atumpan were used to give appellations to the Supreme Being in the story being told. The prominence given to these instruments was an indication of an African contextual dramatic setting.

5.3 Use of Indigenous Folk Media

The folk media used include folktales, folksongs and costume. The stories used are indigenous stories emanating from the Ghanaian community. The musical ensemble performances that appeared intermittently in the drama were all drawn from the existing dances in Ghana. Costumes are the attire worn by the characters (casts) on stage to give them an identity with the help of make-up and props. These costumes to be worn by actors and actresses depict a typical Ghanaian traditional story telling tradition as well as the contextual setting of the story. The narrator, for instance, dressed in a typical casual old lady *costume* tells the story using *ebibindwom* singing style. The costume may also be based on the artistic license and symbolic representation of the character. For instance, Kweku Ananse, after becoming victorious could put on white to represent purity and victory over the tests.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the cultural and artistic dimensions of E.O. Acquah's Nyansaba within the framework of Anansegorndwom, a traditional Ghanaian storytelling music form. Through an in-depth analysis of the composition's structure, the paper has highlighted Acquah's innovative blending of traditional Ghanaian music and modern compositional techniques. The work serves not only as a significant contribution to Ghana's musical heritage but also as a medium through which cultural narratives are preserved and conveyed to contemporary audiences. Through the analysis, this study has demonstrated how music can function as a repository of cultural knowledge, reflecting the values, traditions, and stories of a people. The integration of Anansegorndwom into Acquah's composition reinforces the important role music plays in storytelling, community bonding, and cultural continuity. Moreover, it highlights the adaptability of traditional music forms in contemporary artistic expressions. In conclusion, Nyansaba stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of indigenous African musical traditions. It calls attention to the need for continuous scholarly exploration of such works to ensure that the rich cultural history embedded in them is not lost but rather appreciated and adapted for future generations. Acquah's work exemplifies the power of music in sustaining a very powerful performing art tradition such as the Ananse story, bridging the gap between the past and the present, and in shaping the cultural identity of Ghana within the global music landscape.

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