

SNAIL SHELL INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC: A DYING MUSICAL HERITAGE IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this study was to explore the use of the snail shell in making music in Ghana and to interrogate the problem of what scholars of African music in Ghana are doing about the threat to extinction of some of their traditional music. The theoretical framework of the study which was based on the problem of meaning in African music (Nketia, 1976, 1973, 1962) favoured the integrated approach to the problem of meaning. Using the qualitative research paradigm, the study obtained specific data on the values, opinions, behaviours and social contexts within which the musical performances took place. It was discovered that the Axim Nwaba instrumental group was formed in 1972 but disintegrated in 1993 as a result of competition from the local brass band. During a live performance by the group, all the children and many of the adults heard snail shell music for the first time in their lives. The findings on snail shell music at Axim have shown that the research efforts of scholars on traditional African music in Ghana are not being matched by the potentially vast world of available traditional Ghanaian music. A solution to this problem must be found within the expansion of traditional music archival resources in the country and the need to step up research work on traditional African music in Ghana.*

KEY WORDS: *Nwaba Group, Snail, Shell, Traditional, Instrumental Music, Dying, Musical Heritage*

INTRODUCTION

This study was part of a bigger study I undertook on the *Corpus of traditional African music as resource material for the study of traditional African music in Ghana*. The purpose of this study was to explore the use of the snail shell in making music in Ghana and to interrogate the problem of what scholars of African music in Ghana are doing about their own traditional music some of which have been buried and many of which are on their way to extinction. This problem has been a very big challenge to African music scholars in Ghana and has also been a source of motivation for me in undertaking the study.

THE USE OF SHELLS FOR MUSIC AND COMMUNICATION

Seashells have been used as musical instruments and wind instruments for many hundreds if not thousands of years. Most often the shells of large sea snails are used as trumpets, by cutting a hole

in the spire of the shell or cutting off the tip of the spire altogether. Different kinds of large marine gastropod shells have been turned into “blowing shells”, however the most commonly encountered species used as “conch” trumpets are: the sacred *chank*, *Turbinella pyrum*, known in India as the *shankha*. In Tibet, it is known as “dung-dkar”. The Triton shell is also known as “Triton’s trumpet”, *Charonia tritonis*, is used as a trumpet in Melanesian and Polynesian culture and in Korea and Japan. In Japan, this kind of trumpet is known as the *horagai*. In Korea it is known as the *nagak*. In some Polynesian islands, it is known as “pu”. In the Caribbean the *Queen Conch Strombus gigas* was and is still being used at times as trumpet (Seashell, 2009); Conch Musical Instruments, n.d.).

Long before our modern day communication systems, man found that trumpets made from shells produced a sound that carried for many miles. The most common use of shell trumpets in many parts of the world was as a signalling device. By using it as series of trumpet blasts, messengers were able to communicate detailed messages from village to village and from tribe to tribe. They were used as summons to call warriors to battle and to ring out triumphs in battles. Another use was the announcement to herald the entrance of kings, Emperors, heroes or important persons. To this day in Fiji, shells are used to announce that fish was being sold at the market or at the pier. They could be used to call people to public gatherings such as tribal or community meetings, feasts or sporting events or as preludes during social events. A shell trumpet was used in Samoa as signals to proclaim the return of a sailing vessel from a voyage or fishing trip and to announce curfews, or to announce that fresh fish was on sale in Fiji, or it served as a foghorn on the Mediterranean (Clark, 1996; Bourquin, A, Mayhew, R et al, 1999).

Shells were used and are still being used in several ways. They may be used in religious ceremonies. They could be used as a summons to religious ceremonies as well as often-playing roles in the ceremonies. As a daily call to prayers, *Shinto* priests in Japan still use the Triton Trumpet shell for this event today. As a ritual, the blowing of the Triton trumpet at sundown is still customary in Hawaii today. The shell trumpet often had a magical role in relation to weather. It was used on the one hand to calm rough seas, or on the other to summon the wind when seas were becalmed (ibid).

The Indian *shanka* has held a place in the Hindu religion for millennia. There, it is used as a ritual vessel as well as a trumpet. The *shanka* is also of significance in Buddhism, where, besides its musical uses, it figured importantly into Buddhist iconography. Befitting their role in Tibetan ritual music, where they are called *dung-dkar*, shell trumpets made from *shanka* receive detailed decoration, with carving on the surface of the shell itself and with added ornamentation in metal and semi-precious stone. Shell trumpets were also important ritual instruments in Pre-Columbian South and Central America and in Minoan Crete. In these latter areas, *skeuomorphic* reproductions (“the substitution of products of craftsmanship for components or objects of natural origin”) of shell trumpets, in ceramic and stone, were found archaeologically. The details of their exact purposes remained a mystery (Clark, 1996; Conch Shell Magic-Pelorian Digital, n.d.).

The giant African land snail is the largest species of snail found on land. *Achatina achatina* is the common name of the giant Ghana snail (also known as the giant Tiger land snail). It is species of very large, air-breathing land snail in the family of *Achatinidae*. The species is believed to be

native to West Africa within 100-190 miles of the coasts of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Ghana and Nigeria (Anim, 2011; *Achatina achatina*, n.d.) Ecotypes of *Achatina achatina* for snail farming in Ghana have been catalogued to show the economic importance of the Ghanaian species of the giant African snail (Parden, 2011). Even though snail shells have been used in making music in Ghana, no research has been carried out in that area.

The invention of the phonograph in 1877 by the American scientist, Thomas Edison, was one of technical innovations that made the scientific investigation of non-Western music possible. The phonograph facilitated field work, offering pioneering comparative musicologists the possibility of playback from which to transcribe and analyze music (Myers, 1992). Moreover, the field of musicology in Europe is splendid with phonographic archives which include folk and traditional music of non-Western cultures including Africa (Dahlig-Turek, 2009). There have been some efforts in Ghana to establish phonographic archives. One such effort was the gramophone music museum at Cape Coast, which was a collection of gramophone records from all over the world. Majority of the collections were Ghanaian highlife music of yesteryear and traditional songs. Such efforts, however, have been woefully inadequate in solving the problems related to the expansion of traditional music archival resources in Ghana (Ampomah, 1997).

METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework of the study was based on Nketia's model on the problem of meaning in African music (Nketia, 1976, 1973, 1962) which favoured the integrated approach to the problem of meaning in African music. The conceptual framework was based on structural functionalism, a broad theory in sociology and anthropology, which saw society as a structure with interconnected parts. These parts were the norms, customs, traditions and institutions of a society.

The study used the qualitative research paradigm. It sought to understand the given research problem from the perspectives of the local population it involved in the study by obtaining cultural specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours and social contexts within which the musical performances took place. The methods of primary data collection used in the study were observation and contact methods. The contact methods were Telephone and Personal interviews. The research used the non-probability method of convenience sampling because it was the easiest way to obtain information from members of the population. In this research, two local musicians from Winneba were recruited to help in the work of data collection.

My fieldwork on the search for a snail shell musical ensemble in Ghana started from Sekondi-Takoradi where we were directed to a village nearby but that did not yield any results. We came to Cape Coast where we had some assurances of meeting a snail shell musical group. That information too was not correct. We were then directed to Saltpond but it turned out to be *MmInson* ensemble (Elephant ivory musical ensemble). Further enquiries brought Sefwi Wiawso into the picture. We actually interacted with the leader of the group but a last-minute disappointment prevented us from meeting them. Aburi also came into the picture but locating the group failed. Finally, we turned back to Sekondi-Takoradi where we had an assurance of meeting a snail shell musical group at Axim. We drove to Axim on December 5, 2013 to find a disintegrated snail shell

instrumental ensemble. Fortunately, all the members of the group were in Axim. They agreed to organize a performance on December 27, 2013. On the said date, the data gathered in the course of their performance in the form of interviews, audio and video recordings, pictures and songs were later transcribed and stored on the computer for analysis.

There were ethical issues in relation to participants of the research activity. The first ethical issue involved the collection of information. Request for information put pressure and created anxiety on the respondents. The expressed willingness and informed consent of participants of the study was therefore sought from the respondents. The subjects were made aware of the type of information needed from them, why the information was needed and what purpose the information would be put. Furthermore, it was important to know how the mode of participation in the study affected the participants. The researcher therefore secured voluntary consent from participants.

DISCOVERIES FROM THE FIELD

The leader of the group who gave their former name as the Upper Axim *Nwaba* band told us it was formed in 1972. Before this time, pawpaw stalks were used by children to play instrumental music. The end of the snail shell was cut and sealed off with polythene rubber. A hole was made on one side of the shell. Blowing through this hole produced sound:



Plate 1: *Constructed Snail Shell Musical Instruments*

The performance was staged under a big tree along the Axim beach on December 27, 2013, after twenty-two days of organization. Their performance of local Ghanaian tunes attracted a large crowd most of whom were children who were enjoying snail shell music for the first time in their lives. Some of the children were heard humming the tune of the Ghana National Anthem with the performers. They were used to singing this tune at school parades. Many of the adults heard snail shell music for the first time in their lives. They wondered at the dexterity of the performers.

After the performance, we had the chance to interview the performers. I wanted to find out from them how easy or difficult it was to learn the instrument. According to the leader, it was a little difficult to play the instrument but with guidance and perseverance, one could learn it. I then asked

the question of helping the children to carry on with the legacy. According to them, the ensemble used to perform along with a band. The first step of getting the children involved was to set up the band again. After sustaining their interest, they could then help them to learn the instruments.



Plate 2: Snail Shell Musical Performance by Axim Nwaba Group

According to the leader, prior to the formation of the group, one day a chief fisherman by name Nana Atta-Gyan brought a big seashell home from a fishing expedition. They were all surprised when they heard a very loud hornlike sound when the chief fisherman blew into an opening at the side of the seashell. From that time on, whenever someone was missing during a sea expedition, a need had to be satisfied or danger was encountered on the sea, the seashell was blown to inform the townsfolk so they could give a helping hand. The chief fisherman suggested that since the pawpaw stalk lasted for a few days they could use the seashell in its place to provide the music for the ensemble as the shell could last for many years. He brought some of the shells from his sea expeditions for the anxious youths to try out. After experimenting for some time, members of the group were able to produce musical sounds from the shells. Since the seashells were difficult to get from the sea, he further suggested that they used the local land snail shells, which were much more in abundance. This was how the Upper Axim Snail band came into being. The instrumental ensemble was made up of the snail shells, the castanets, the bell, the bass drum, the side drum and the alto or tenor drum known as the *Kyinkyin*. The bass drum was made by sending an iron barrel to the blacksmith who cut open the ends and covered them with sheepskin or cattle hide. The other drums were made in a similar way.

At the time the band was started, there used to be a very popular brass band in one of the suburbs in Axim called *Akyinim*. When the brass band collapsed, people in town had no other choice than to hire the services of the snail shell band. Teachers hired the group for their get-together and end-of-year activities. The Fancy dress groups also hired their services.

The Fancy dress involved the holding of carnivals by masqueraders with Brass band music. European merchants who traded along the Ghanaian coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were believed to have introduced the fancy dress idea. These masquerades became

known among the traditional Gã as the *emashie* and among the Akan as *kaakaamotobi* because of their grotesque appearance during their carnival sessions. Since its introduction, the tradition became popular along the coastal areas of Ghana particularly at Cape Coast, Winneba and Agona Swedru in the central region and Sekondi-Takoradi in the Western Region. Here, during Christmas and other celebrations, dancing to brass band music with some traditional touch and the soliciting of alms characterized the performances of the masqueraders. In Winneba, there was a fancy dress festival on every New Year's Day involving competition among the various masquerade groups. Smaller groups of masqueraders who moved from house to house, in contrast, performed and punctuated their dance and music with the blowing of whistles in anticipation of rewards in cash or kind from each household (Ampomah, 1997).

In the light of the above, it was quite understandable why the Fancy dress groups in Axim would hire the services of the snail shell group in the absence of the brass band. The absence of the Brass band during the time of festivities was quite disturbing to the people of Axim so from time to time they went outside and hired one to perform for them. The elders decided that there was the need to have a permanent brass band. Therefore, finally, they got a new set of brass band instruments for the townsfolk. This went a very long way in gradually collapsing the snail band. By the year 1993, after twenty-one years of scintillating snail shell music, the once vibrant snail band in Axim finally collapsed. Our visit to Axim on December 27, 2013 brought it back to life.

CONCLUSION

The findings on snail shell music at Axim have unravelled a bigger problem about unexplored territory in the field of Ghanaian traditional music. At the initial stages of the study, I made mention of the fact that the field of musicology in Europe was splendid with phonographic archives, which included folk and traditional music of non-Western cultures including Africa (Dahlig-Turek, 2009). Some efforts have already been made in establishing phonographic archives in Ghana such as the gramophone music museum at Cape Coast. This was a collection of gramophone records from all over the world. Majority of the collection were Ghanaian highlife music and traditional songs. Such efforts, however, have been woefully inadequate (Ampomah, 1997). The question was then posed as to what African music scholars were doing about their own traditional music some of which have already been buried and many of which are on their way to extinction? This was the challenge being posed by the snail shell instrumental music group at Axim which had collapsed for over twenty years. As long as the brass band remained active, the snail shell instrumental music in Axim would remain under threat. There should therefore be a way of protecting this ensemble. According to the group, there was once a competition organized by the National Commission on Culture involving traditional performing groups in Sekondi-Takoradi in which they placed second. Unfortunately, such activities have been stopped because of lack of money.

The predicament of the Axim snail shell instrumental music was a small problem that has opened a bigger problem. Considering the effort, time and money expended in looking for a snail shell ensemble in the country, it was quite evident that many of such ensembles may have been buried or are on their way to extinction. There was this broader problem of other musical types in similar

situations as the snail shell instrumental music. A solution to this problem must be found within the expansion of traditional music archival resources in the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

My study covered only the snail shell instrumental group at Axim. Considering the effort, time and money expended in looking for a snail shell ensemble in the country, it was quite evident that many of such ensembles may have been buried or were on their way to extinction. Several of them could be found in the country. They needed to be studied in order to place the research findings in a wider national context. The need to protect smaller traditional ensembles, like the snail shell instrumental groups, against competition from bigger and popular ensembles like the brass bands was stressed in the study. The government through the Centre for National Culture and other organizations could be of great help in solving this problem.

The study also stressed the importance of establishing more phonographic archives, musical archives and museums to keep records of Ghanaian traditional music in the form of audio-video recordings, pictures, musical instruments and notated music using modern technologies like the computer and its various applications. This would go a long way in preserving the traditional Ghanaian music heritage.

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