

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4240



# MUSIC OF THE **ASHANTI** OF GHANA

RECORDED BY VERNA GILLIS

With David Moisés Perez Martinez



WOMEN ACCOMPANYING ON STICK TIME BEATERS IN HUNTAADO

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE



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**Side 1**

Band 1—Kete  
Band 2—Nnwomkoro  
Band 3—Mpre  
Band 4—Dansuom

**Side 2**

Band 1—Sikyi  
Band 2—Highlife  
Band 3—Bragoro  
Band 4—Ntan

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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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## Music of the Ashanti of Ghana



Market in Kumasi, Capital of the Ashanti region

The historic Ashanti occupied an area of about 24,379 square miles, about 9,700 of which are in the contemporary Ashanti Region of the Republic of Ghana (the former Gold Coast). The Ashanti created an independent kingdom which flourished from the 17th century until their conflict with the British at the end of the 19th century. Through the use of arms and diplomacy, they extended their territory and created an influential social unit which was rarely defeated until a series of Anglo-Ashanti wars in the 19th century culminated in their defeat (1896) and annexation (1901) to the British settlements on the coast of Ghana. They were, undoubtedly, one of the most successful of the late kingdoms of pre-colonial Africa.

Evidence in Ashanti oral traditions indicates that music played a major role in their socio-economic and political behavior. It is known that many Ashanti kings were patrons of music who encouraged the creation or adoption of new royal orchestras. The creation of NKOFÉ horn ensemble, for example, is attributed to King Osei Kwadwo, while as a vital component of Ashanti social behavior is as old as the kingdom itself. The pieces in the present collection help illustrate some of the roles which music played in the social life of the Ashanti.

NTAHERA horn ensemble and KETE drum music are associated with Osei Tutu, the founder of the Ashanti Kingdom. King Opoku Ware, who succeeded Osei Tutu, is also remembered in Ashanti music tradition for using MPEBI and NKRAWIRI drums.

There is also evidence that the expansion of the Kingdom often led to the enlargement of music organization in the court of the Ashantihene (King of Ashanti). New musical types and instruments were adapted to Ashanti musical traditions as Ashanti came into contact with other states. The presence of APIREDE, and the use of DONNO and MPINTINTOA - both of which are drums of Northern Ghana origin - in certain Ashanti musical performances, are examples of the borrowing and adaptation that took place during the course of the expansion of the Ashanti territory.

All these pieces of evidence emphasize the integration of music and social life among the Ashanti. From this evidence it is possible to assume that the role of music

Since most of the pieces are drum music it is necessary to warn against the conclusion that all Ashanti music is for percussion instruments. The use of percussion is certainly emphasized among the Ashanti as is the practice with many African societies. However, it is also true that other instruments are used.

African music does not aim at regularity in pulse as does most western music. In African music there is an horizontal or linear principle by which successive durational values are grouped into sections of varying lengths which may coincide with the growth pulses, or beats.



Some young men 'hanging out' at the Ghana Cultural Center in Kumasi



Polyphonic stratification underlies the rhythmic organization of these pieces; the linear structure of most of the pieces can be grouped into three strata according to the roles of the instruments in the ensemble. Idiophones such as bells, rattles, stick clappers and castanets for the first layer; these instruments play short, repetitive, rhythmic patterns that are different but complementary to crystalize the foundation pulse by maintaining a "rhythmic ground" throughout the entire performance. One or two subordinate drums and handclapping may reinforce that role.

To the Ashanti, of to the African for that matter, repetition is an aesthetic strength which helps the listener to predict the various lines or patterns that are interplayed. The next layer, which I shall designate as Modified Ostinato for want of a better term, is formed by intermediary drums that participate in the function of the accompanying drums and, with occasional improvisations, add to the richness of the rhythmic design. Sometimes between these drums and the master drums there is a definite interplay of patterns. Superimposed on the recurring mosaic of patterns, the master drum (which forms the third layer) plays changing patterns, provides a running commentary on the dance or sends messages to the audience and dancers depending upon the context of the performance.

#### Side I

Band 1 - KETE: KYENKYEHE Rhythm. Performed by the Kete Children's Group, Mr. P.K. Attah, leader. Recorded in Kumasi. Instruments: Doŋŋo (hourglass drum, stick beaten); Kwadum (pegged drum, beaten with two sticks); Apentema (pegged, hand beaten drum); Petia (pegged drum, beaten with two sticks); Abrukua (pegged drum, beaten with two sticks); Dawuro (metal bell); Akasa (gourd rattle).

KETE is a drum ensemble found at the courts of chiefs. It has always been the favorite ensemble of Ashanti kings. The ensemble is played at royal funerals, although with permission of the Chief it may be played at other funerals as well. The accompanying dance which the Ashanti describe as "pleasant and charming" is noted for its courtliness as well as its marked distinction between the graceful bodily movements of women and the strutting display of masculinity of male dancers.

A full kete orchestra consists of three parts: the drum ensemble, a section of "pipers" who provide interludes and free accompaniment, and a vocal counterpart of the pipers. Because of lack of knowledge and pipers, the pipe and vocal sections are dropped in most performances today, as is the case with this recording. In the Ashantiene's court, however, the traditional three sections are maintained and the drum ensemble is relatively larger to reflect the ruler's power.

There are atleast eight different pieces which might be played by a kete ensemble. Each of these is identified by its particular rhythmic organization and each piece has a meaning associated with a person, some action or an event. The Kyenkyehene rhythm in this selection refers to a mighty chief by the same name. Sometimes all of the kete pieces are played one after the other without any extra musical connotations, but only for the enjoyment of musicians and dancers. This selection may be played to accompany a procession of chiefs on ceremonial occasions.

Band 2 - NNWOMKORO- Performed by the group Manhyia Tete Nwomkoro, Mr. Yiadom Boakye, leader. Recorded in Kumasi.

NNWOMKORO songs are performed exclusively by adult women who may be in some kind of associative relationship. These songs are sung purely for entertainment and members join the group only for the love of making music. The group may perform at wake-keeping in honor and memory of a deceased member or one who may have been known for his interest in the group. On such occasions the performance is considered a tribute to the deceased and the bereaved.

Accompaniment of the songs is usually handclapping. However, the use of a few idiophones and one or two drums can be noted in performances by some of the well established performance groups. The nnwomkoro songs in this selection are accompanied by handclapping, castanets, a bell (dawuro), double bell (nnawuta) and a Prenpansua ( an idiophone of the Mbira or Sanza type) with three tones.

The themes of the songs are generally centered around loved ones and prominent members of the community. Even though these songs are generally described as songs of 'pleasure', the verbal contents do not always reflect a happy mood. Songs which allude to yearnings in the heart for an absent friend or lover, and songs that reflect hope or disappointment, bitterness or resignation, insult or satire can be heard at most nnwomkoro performances. The songs in this selection have texts that are meant to praise the Ashanti Kings. Nnwomkoro songs are a means of entertainment as well as a vehicle of communication - a medium of expressing personal and social experiences.

Band 3 - MPRE - Performed by the group Manhyia Tete Nnwomkoro, Mr. Yiadom Boakye, leader. Recorded in Kumasi.

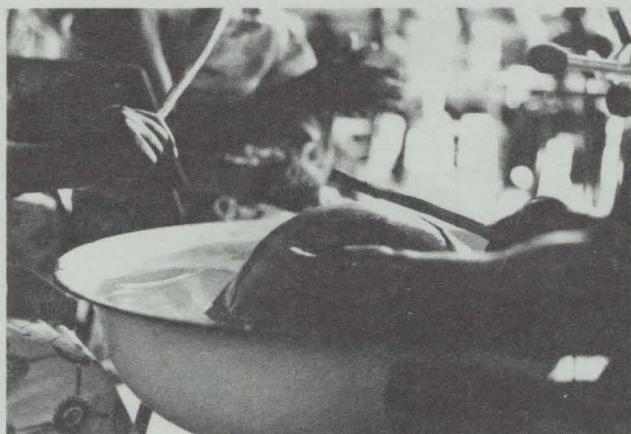
MPRE is a light form of adowa music. Adowa is music of a popular band which is especially created for funerals and has borrowed alot of its elements from other musical types, especially from Kete (refer to band 1.) Mpre is performed at wake-keeping and at funeral ceremonies. It is characterized by a relatively gentle pace. The master drum of the full adowa ensemble, Atumpan, is not used in the performance of mpre. Here the domo is used instead. Since it is funeral music, most of the themes of the songs are based on death and the havoc it brings to individuals and the community. Hence, in one of the songs we hear the women sing:

Death is invading my home,  
I cannot go to sleep.  
Wherever I go, I am sure to meet death.  
It is invading my home, I cannot go to sleep.



Woman playing double bell, nnawuta, from group Manhyia Tete Nwomkoro (Side 1, band 3)





Dansuom - Side 1, Band 4

## SIDE 2

Band 1 - SIKYI - Performed by the group 'Sikyi'. Recorded in Huntaado. Instruments: Two Frikyiwa (idiophone consisting of two pieces: a metal ring worn on the thumb and a small round bell constructed to be worn on the middle finger); Tamole (frame drum); Sikyi drum (pegged); Adendenmma (smaller pegged drum); Akasa (gourd rattle); Apentenma (pegged drum).



Woman dancing in Huntaado (Side 2, Band 1)

Sikyi is a form of drumming and dancing which came into vogue not only with the Ashanti, but also in the whole Akan area of Ghana in the 1920's. It is characterized by dance postures and movements which simulate the dynamics of courtship through contrasting demonstrations of strutting and bobbing, theatrical elegance, pastoral innocence, and abandonment.

Band 2 - HIGHLIFE - Performed by the group Manhyia Tete Nwomkoro, Mr. Yiadom Boakye, leader. Recorded in Kumasi.

The transplantation of western music into Africa has led to the emergence of new communities of musical taste whose creative urges have found outlets in new compositions. One such category is highlife, a popular music which grew out of traditional popular music of the early part of the present century. Like other African-derived music, highlife shows a preponderance of African musical elements bonded to Western musical features.

Among the Ashanti (as among other Akans) the guitar has replaced the Seprewa, a harp lute. The wide range, amplification, facility, and tone quality of the guitar were found to be more rewarding to the musicians than the seprewa. However, as this piece demonstrates, when the African took the guitar, his desire to produce simultaneous rhythmic-melodic patterns compelled him to adopt the style of seprewa music to the guitar. In this style a number of patterns interlace to form a meshwork of "inherent" rhythms of which some are more obtrusive than others. The rhythmic foundation produced by this reticulation of patterns is reinforced by the subtle rhythmic patterns of the Prenpansua (thumb piano).



Women playing hourglass drum, donno, and double bell, from group Manhyia Tete Nwomkoro (Side 1, band 4)



Band 3 - BRAGORO - Puberty Festival. Performed by the group Manhyia Tete Nwomkoro. Mr. Yiadom Boakye, leader. Recorded in Kumasi.

Among the Ashanti, death is a landmark in an individual's life cycle which is publicly celebrated with dru-ming, singing, and dancing. Unlike her male counterpart, a girl's coming of age is made public through music and dancing. The occasion being one of joy, the text of the songs reflect that mood. That is why in the first song we hear the women sing (or, virtually shout) the following praise to God:

Shout for joy!  
Joy! Joy !! Joy!!!  
Great God of old, we give you thanks.

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The songs are accompanied by two hour glass drums and old hoe blades played by women only. Men are not in any perceivable way connected with such performances.

Band 4 - NTAN - Performed by the Ntan Group, Mr. B.K. Amankwa, leader. Recorded in Toase. Instruments: Frikyiwa; Tweneboa (pegged drum); two Agyamma (laced drums); Akasa (pots with attached pieces of metal).

NTAN is a form of drumming and dancing which was at one time popular throughout the Akan area, including Ashanti. Like Sikyi, it is light in character. It may be performed at funerals, during the last phase of the odwira festival, and on other social occasions. The drums found in a Ntan ensemble have always been considered art objects because they are decorated with very elaborate relief carvings each of which is symbolic as well. For example, the master drum is usually mounted on a tiger; the tiger in this context denotes the power of the drum in controlling the affairs of the occasions.

Francis A. Kobina Saighoe

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Recorded in 1976 by Verna Gillis, with david moises perez martinez

Edited by Verna Gillis

All photographs - Verna Gillis

Cover photograph - Sikyi drummer from Huntaado (Side 2, Band 1)

Notes by Francis A. Kobina Saighoe

Acknowledgments: Mr. Yeboah Nyamekye; Ghana Cultural Center in Kumasi; Arts Council of Ghana; Marina Roseman.

Dedicated to Dr. Rose Brandel, a spirited, encouraging teacher, Director of the program in Ethnomusicology at Hunter College, N.Y.C.

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- FE 4491 Vodun-Rada Rite for Erzulie  
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