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The Ghanaian Concert Party

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WHEN I began, in the late 1960's, playing the guitar for concert parties (mainly the Jaguar Jokers, plus also the Happy Stars and F. Kenya's Riches Big Sound) I knew little of their origin and history. When I began later to do research on the genre, it was Efua Sutherland, at her house in Dzorwulu in the early 1970's, who pointed me in the

right direction and suggested some of the key concert pioneers I should interview.

The Ghanaian Concert Party is one of the many art genres that have emerged in this century in sub-Saharan Africa that blend or syncretise local and foreign elements. However, in spite of their acculturated nature, these new art-styles contain distinctive features that express the identities, symbols, aesthetics and underlying value orientations of their African practitioners and audiences. The ability of these new art-forms to reflect and express the moods and outlooks of Africans undergoing rapid socio-cultural transformations is helped by their often ephemeral and transient nature: what Karin Barber (1987 :12) calls their 'aesthetic of change'. Moreover, besides popular performance, painting and literature, these new syncretic and creative art-forms go far beyond what in the West is normally called 'art'; for they embrace coffin designs, house decorations and bar murals, portrait photography, hairbarbering advertisements, sign writing, wire toy vehicles, decorated bread labels, lorry slogans, current jokes and expressions, and the catch names for printed clothes and hair-styles.

Ghanaian concert parties are professional groups of itinerant artists who stage vernacular shows for the rural and urban audiences that combine slapstick musical comedies, folk stories, acrobatics, moral sermons, magical displays and dance-music sessions. They appeared just after the First World War and since then have acted as a cultural vortex in Ghana, for besides drawing on the indigenous and imported, old and new, they have accreted to themselves local highlife music and dance, sign painting (large adverts called concert 'cartoons'), comic literature and the film/video format. Furthermore, since the 1960's the concert party and its associated guitar band has been one of Ghana's most important influences on and avenues for contemporary popular performers. Its influence has even spread to Togo and Nigeria.

Although the number of active groups has dwindled in recent years, their impact has continued through the use of new media.

As the name 'concert party' suggests, this genre initially emerged out of the imported Western concert milieu of the early twentieth century. Indeed, two Ghanaian comics called the 'Two Macs' performed for the black and white elite at a Costume Ball and Concert at Cape Castle as early as 1903 (Braun and Cole 1995). More important were the school concerts that were performed on stage every Empire Day (May 24th). Cantatas and Bible-stories also helped introduce Western stage-craft to Ghana. A third

foreign influence on the concert party came through films that began to be shown from around First World War times and starred Charlie Chaplin and blackface comedians like Al Jolson. Fourthly, vaudeville and music-hall was brought to the country by visiting artists from abroad.

Ghana's first concert actor of note was Teacher Yalley, the headmaster of a Sekondi elementary school. According to Efu Sutherland (1970) his career began at his school's Empire Day Concerts in 1918, when he joked, sang and danced, wearing fancy dress, wig, moustache and the make-up of an American black-and-white minstrel. His three hour show opened with a hired brass-band that marched and campaigned around town, ending up outside the theatre. Inside, Yalley performed his comedy sketches, assisted by a trap (i.e. jazz) drummer and harmonium player who provided a cross-section of the then current popular ballroom dance tunes: ragtimes, foxtrots, quick-steps and waltzes. His shows were in English and the tickets expensive, consequently his audience consisted mainly of the educated black elite. The famous Fanti comedian Ishmael 'Bob' Johnson told me (interview May 1974) that the audience consisted of local gentlemen and officials and a small number of Europeans.

Bob Johnson's own acting career began at shows performed at his Sekondi Methodist school that took place after the Empire Day parades around town. His first group was a schoolboy affair called the Versatile Eight. This included the three principal characters of all subsequent concert parties: the joker, the gentleman and the lady impersonator. Johnson in blackface played the joker, and did it so well this role has since become known as the 'Bob' for the concert profession. Johnson's success was partly a result of his fusing together elements of the character of the imported blackface minstrel with that of the mischievous Ananse-the-Spider hero of Akan folklore. Johnson told me that he obtained his name 'Bob' from the seamen who visited the Optimism Club opposite his house in Sekondi where he often watched Liberian sailors singing sea-shanties to the accompaniment of guitar and musical saw, and African-American ones performing comedy sketches and singing foxtrots and ragtimes. It was the latter who gave him the nickname 'Bob'; in fact he told me that African-American sailors of those times seemed to call everyone 'Bob'.

Johnson also told me that another influence on him came through the shows performed between 1924-6 by Glass and Grant, an African-American (or probably Americo-Liberian) comedy team brought from Liberia to Ghana by Alfred Ocansey, a Ghanaian film distributor and cinema-hall owner. Johnson saw them at Sekondi's Optimism Club and was impressed by the 'boldness of stage', i.e. their professionalism. Their shows, like Teacher Yalley's, were high-class affairs and began with a silent film before the comedy act. The act itself was vaudeville, with the minstrel Glass and his wife Grant joking, tap-dancing and singing ragtimes. This pair based themselves at Accra's Palladium Cinema (built by Ocansey and modelled on the London Palladium) where they were understudied by the Ga comics Williams and Marbel (Augustus Williams I interviewed in July

1973) and the Sierra Leone ones Williams and Nicol (Nicol was also a ragtime and jazz pianist). When Glass and Grant left for Nigeria to continue their West African tour the 'Accra vaudeville' tradition continued for some years.

By the late 1920's the concert party tradition had therefore begun to separate into two distinct varieties: the upper-class shows of Yalley and the Accra Vaudeville on the one hand, and Bob Johnson's schoolboy sixpenny shows on the other.

In 1930 Johnson went professional when (with Bob Ansa) he formed the Two Bobs and the Carolina Girl that staged for villagers and the urban poor. In short, Johnson 'hi-jacked' the genre from the elite - which was lucky for Ghana as the high-class variety gradually died out. According to Efu Sutherland (1970) the Two Bobs shows were given pre-publicity by a masked bell-ringer wearing a billboard, which was cheaper than hiring out a full brassband.

The show itself began with half an hour of 'Comedies' that consisted of three segments: an 'Opening Chorus' of a quickstep danced and sung by the three comedians, an 'In' during which one of the Bobs sang a ragtime, ending with a 'Duet' of joking by the two Bobs. Music was supplied by the group's own jazz (i.e. trap or kit) drummer, with some help from a few members of a local brass or orchestral band hired for the night. After the opening 'Comedies' came the 'Scene' or play proper. This lasted for an hour, and was performed in English, but with an occasional translation into Akan, since their audience were less Westernised than those of their high class counterparts. Yet another difference between the two early varieties of concert was that Johnson began using a few local highlifes in his acts, in addition to popular Western songs.

In 1935 Bob Johnson became the joker for the Axim Trio concert party that became the prototype for all succeeding ones. E.K. Dadson played 'Susanna' and Charlie Turpin was the 'gentleman.' They acted to the accompaniment of their own drummer and harmonium player and, at one point according to Efu Sutherland (1970), the Trio featured the famous 'palmwine' guitarist Kwame Asare (or Jacob Sam) who performed in drag and sang in a falsetto voice.

Their very first engagement was a tour of Nigeria for which they were joined by the twenty-two strong Cape Coast Super Babies dance-orchestra. The Axiom Trio's normal practice in Ghana, however, was to supplement their two musicians with some members of a local brass band or 'konkoma' marching group. Their shows consisted of an 'Opening Chorus', 'In' and 'Duet', followed by a two hour play. The titles of some of their plays up until the mid 1950's, when the group dissolved, included 'The Coronation of King George The Sixth', 'The Bond of 1844' (about the Fanti-British alliance), 'The Kibi Murder Case' (a famous 1942 murder case), 'The Tenfoot Man' and 'The Downfall of Adolf Hitler'. Another was 'Kwame Nkrumah Will Never Die', for like many of the concert parties the Axim Trio was a staunch supporter of the C.P.P.



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Besides Nigeria, the Axim Trio visited Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Cote d'Ivoire. They also made extensive tours of Ghana, including the north, starting the countrywide 'diffusion' of concert parties as Professor Bame puts it (1969 and 1985). Bob Johnson also made a separate trip to Nigeria in 1937. Eburn Clark (1979) mentions that the performances of the Axim Trio and Bob Johnson at Tinubu Square in Lagos influenced the famous Yoruba dance-band and variety entertainer, Bobby Benson.

Whereas the high-class concert parties died out during the

1930', the Axim Trio became so popular that, by the 1940's, many other groups appeared that modelled themselves on it. Bob Cole's Happy Trio, the Jovial Jokers, the Dix Covian Jokers and the West End Trio all from the western end of the country; the Saltpond Trio and Sam (ie. Kwame Asare) and his Party from the Central Region; Y. B. Bampoe's schoolboy Yanky Trio from the Eastern Region; and the Keta Trio from the Volta Region.

The Second World War had an impact on the concert profession as several local performers staged shows for the visiting Allied troops. Concerts were even held for the African troops in India and Burma, for between 1943 and 1946 an African Theatre was set up within the West African Frontier Force that was stationed in these countries. The leader was Bob Vans, together with six other Ghanaians, toured camps and hospitals, performing in 'pidgin' English to the music of the 'konkoma' variety of highlife. When Vans returned to Ghana in 1946 he and other ex-servicemen formed the Burma Jokers, renamed in 1948 the Ghana Trio due to the rising nationalist sentiments of the period (interview with Vans in August 1974).

It was also that year that the Nigerian playwright, Hubert Ogunde, who had just begun to pioneer Yoruba travelling theatre, made two trips to Ghana. As a result of this he adopted the jazz music and black-and-white minstrel make-up of the Ghanaian concert parties for his own group in Lagos. Indeed, for several years he actually called his popular drama group

a concert party (Clark, 1970).

In 1952 a major contribution to the concert profession was made by the highlife guitarband leader E.K. Nyame who, that year and encouraged by the Axim Trio's commercial success, formed his own group. He called it the Akan Trio and recruited actors from amongst his own bandsmen, taking the role of 'gentleman' for himself. His synthesis of highlife music and concert acting, plus the fact that the Akan Trio was the first to perform exclusively in Akan, made his group such a success that

within a few years most other guitar bands had followed suite. Conversely, already existing concert parties expanded their small musical sections to a full guitar band. Yet another of E. K.'s innovations was that his was the first guitarband to use Afro-Cuba percussion (bongos and congos) and the plucked double base of Jazz and swing bands - ideas he borrowed from the contemporary but more prestigious highlife dancebands that were being pioneered by E. T. Mensah and his Tempos in Accra. E.K.'s made four hundred records (including forty in support of Nkrumah) which were not only popular in Ghana but in Nigeria as well.

It was both the Axim Trio and the more Africanised (or Akanised) Akan Trio that became the prototypes for most postwar Ghanaian concert parties and, indeed, Togolese ones such as the Happy Stars of Lome. Some of the most important Ghanaian concert groups of the Fifties and Sixties were Kakaiku's group, the Ghana Trio, the Jaguar Jokers, Onyina's Royal Trio, Kwaa Mensah's group, the Happy Stars (of Nsawam), I. E. Mason's (in which Koo Nimo made his debut), Yamoahs, Doctor Gyasi's Noble Kings (the first to use keyboards and horns), the Workers Brigade concert party - and later F. Kenya's Riches Big Sound, Nana Ampadu's African Brothers, Okukuseku's group and Efuia Sutherland's Kusum Agoromba. By 1960, when the first concert party union was formed, there were about thirty groups in the country, reaching a high point in the mid 1970's when there were between fifty and sixty of them.

Some of the concert groups at the moment are the African Brothers, Kofi Sammy's Okukuseku, the City Boys, Alex Konadu's group, the Kumapim Royals, Obfa, the late Senior Eddie Donkor's Simple Seven, F. Micah's Osei Kofi's Heroes, Safohene Djenu's Appollos, K. K.'s Number Two and the Adehyeman concert party.

Although the number of active groups has dwindled in recent years, their impact has continued through the use of new media. There have been film versions of concert plays such as 'I Told You So' that starred the late Bob Cole - and more recently an efflorescence of local video productions that employ concert performers. Television concert party series began in the 1970's and these tend to have a strong didactic and moral tone, as well as providing a major avenue for concert actresses. The two most popular are Osofo Dadzie and Obra. Since the late 1970's some concert groups also had their plays photographed and put together in comic literature 'photoplay' form, complete with balloon captions. Another new medium is the 'dialogue' cassette, where a play and music are put onto pre-recorded cassette and released on the local market. The concert party format is also being used for 'theatre-for-development' (an idea originally pioneered by the Workers Brigades and Efuia Sutherland) on topics such as family planning, Aids and environmental protection. In fact, the concert party is still so well-loved by the general public that the National Theatre's biggest current crowd puller is the concert party show series that they have begun holding on Saturday. **GR**

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