Urban ANXIETY & Its Sonic Response

Narrating Ghanaian Gospel-Highlife

by John Collins

SINCE THE 1980S A NEW musical-cum-religious phenomenon has swept Ghana. This is the *gospel-highlife* dance music of the country's Christian churches. In fact, gospel highlife now constitutes around 60 percent[1] of the country's local cassette production and musical air play. There is also a gospel musicians union, formed in 1987, and several gospel recording studios run by churches.[2] Moreover, some churches have begun using concert parties—a form of local popular drama or highlife opera.[3] The clientele at my own

Bokoor Recording Studio in Accra reflects this development. When I began running it in 1982, it catered mainly for secular highlife and concert party bands. Now, however, the clientele is almost completely comprised of gospel groups.

An economic explanation for this shift in local popular music from the secular to the sacred is that during Ghana's economic slump of the 1970s the music industry almost collapsed. Many musicians moved abroad,[4] while many of those who remained behind sought the patronage of churches, which began to use popular dance music for outreach purposes.

Whatever the reasons for this fusion of popular performance and local churches, it brought together two quite distinct spheres of life that both have a long history of reflecting and articulating the urban anxieties arising from the rapid socio-economic changes that began under colonialism. Very briefly, these changes are as follows: the influx of cocoa money, the fragmentation of the traditional Ghanaian extended family system, the weakening of traditional authority, the rise of aggressive individualism, increased migration, the emergence of modern social classes, increased economic uncertainty, and urbanization – all essentially factors of modernization.[5]

The anxieties resulting from this modernization are, however, often expressed in traditional terms: witchcraft and 'juju' accusations, magical 'money doubling' and the help or hindrance from spirits such as forest dwarfs (Akan *mmoatia*). Another example expresses in the waves of urban hysteria concerning strangers that have occasionally swept the country and been couched in supernatural terms. In 1969, for example, many people painted white crosses on their doors and bolted them after dark, as there was a rumor that the forest devil *(Sasabonsum)* was looking for his son who had run away to town. A little later there was a market panic over a giant man-eating grass cutter from Togo and Nigeria.[6] Then in May 1974 more paranoia swept through Ghana over strangers from Benin and Nigeria whose touch or handshake would wither a man's genitals or women's breasts. An accused man was stoned to death for this by a frightened crowd at Circle, Accra, that year. In January 1997, a similar wave of hysteria occurred and, this time, about twenty people (including strangers) were killed.[7]

What some writers [8] have observed is that witchcraft accusations are paradoxically a modern - if neurotic - response to change that has actually increased in Ghana this century, triggered by the aforementioned factors of modernization.

In traditional culture, witchcraft accusations were a dramatically religious way of limiting excessive individualism and wealth by communally-oriented social systems. Ironically, the socio-economic changes initiated by the British led to an increase in witchcraft accusations at the same time the British banned the very practices and cults that traditionally exposed witchcraft; this was especially the case in southern Ghana where the colonialists had a firmer grip.[9] As a result, from the 1920 there was a 'search for security' as the social-psychologist Margaret Field put it,[10] with southern Ghanaians patronizing new anti-witchcraft movements: either by importing cults such as *Tigari* and *Blekete*[11] from the north, by reorienting older local cults,[12] or by founding separatist Christian sects.[13]

Nana Ampadu
Leader of the African Brothers guitar band and concert party. ©John Collins.

These spiritual Christian sects were led by charismatic prophets who preached a millennial message to their congregations composed mainly of new urban migrants.[14] They also employed many traditional religious practices: spiritual healing, exorcism, divination and possessions (by the Holy Ghost).

Unlike the European churches, the separatist spiritual sects employed drumming and dancing for worship. In the 1920s the church of the Twelve Apostles clapped, swayed and danced to gourd rattles that helped drive off evil spirits. The Musama Disco Christo sect on the other hand used local Asafo drums[15]. Later, other instruments were added. The Keta-based Apostolic Revelation Society, for instance, was by the 1950s using harmonium, brass instruments and playing in 'night-club style'[16].

In fact, it was partly the refusal of the orthodox churches to allow drumming and dance-music that led to Ghanaian

Christian congregations moving in ever-increasing numbers to the separatist spiritual and Pentecostal sects. By 1955 there were seventeen of these denominations in Accra alone,[17] and today there are literally hundreds of them throughout Ghana.[18] And the main concern of their congregations is 'witches and evil men at workplaces'.[19]

Although drumming and dancing have spread nowadays to the orthodox churches, it was the separatist churches, with their traditional African emphasis on worship through dance, that pioneered gospel-highlife. For instance, the *Kristo Asafo Mission* formed in 1971 runs seven gospel dance-bands and one concert party [20].

Highlife performance has not only been drawn into the orbit of the local spiritual sects and churches, but also exhibits some similarities with them. First, both are trans-cultural 20th century Ghanaian responses that successfully blend African and Western elements. Second, they cater very much for the same intermediate class of people who have emerged in between the Westernized elites and subsistence peasant farmers: these include cash-crop farmers, new urbanites, semi-skilled workers, artisans, petty traders, clerks, teachers, drivers and so on.[21]

The third similarity between local popular performance and spiritual churches is that they both provide their audiences with cathartic release in the Aristotelian sense of a therapeutic purging of the emotions.[22]

Catharsis is an aspect of the Ghanaian ritual dance-dramas associated with many initiation, divination and possession ceremonies and annual festivals,[23] and some of these old cathartic procedures have found their way into the spiritual churches. Their congregations dance, become possessed and speak in tongues while their charismatic prophets make dramatic divinations, miracles and exorcisms. The resulting cathartic renewal is reflected in such terms as 'revival' and 'born again.'

In a more secular context, cathartic release through dancing, weeping, laughing, applauding and jeering is a feature of the local concert party. This modern form of popular Ghanaian opera involves both a highlife session for its audience to dance, followed by comic plays full of moral messages, exciting action and melodramatic confrontations between old and new, good and evil. Bame[24] claims that the concert party is a 'social tranquilizer' integrating anti-social behaviour, whilst Ricard [25] says that the Togolese variant 'fills an emotional vacuum' for the newly urbanized.

Bame[26] particularly points out that cathartic release is reinforced by the high degree of audience participation associated with the genre.[27] Moreover, humorous depictions of strangers such as Nigerians and Liberians[28] help deflect or displace inter-ethnic hostility. Equally, emotionally defusing is the lampooning of the pompous lawyer, policeman and teacher, or the illiterate; often by the genre's central 'Bob' character, who is a stage version of the traditional trickster hero, Ananse-the-Spider.

A fourth similarity between popular performance and the separatist churches is that they both concern themselves with the anxieties and tensions of modern urban life, either trying to spiritually resolve them or, as in the case of popular text, depict them and comment on them. Let us look at what Brempong and Barber [29] call the 'chaos' and 'horrors' of city life as portrayed in highlife songs and concert party texts. I will focus on the topics of urban migration, class stratification, the break-up of the extended family and the contemporary fascination with stage demons.

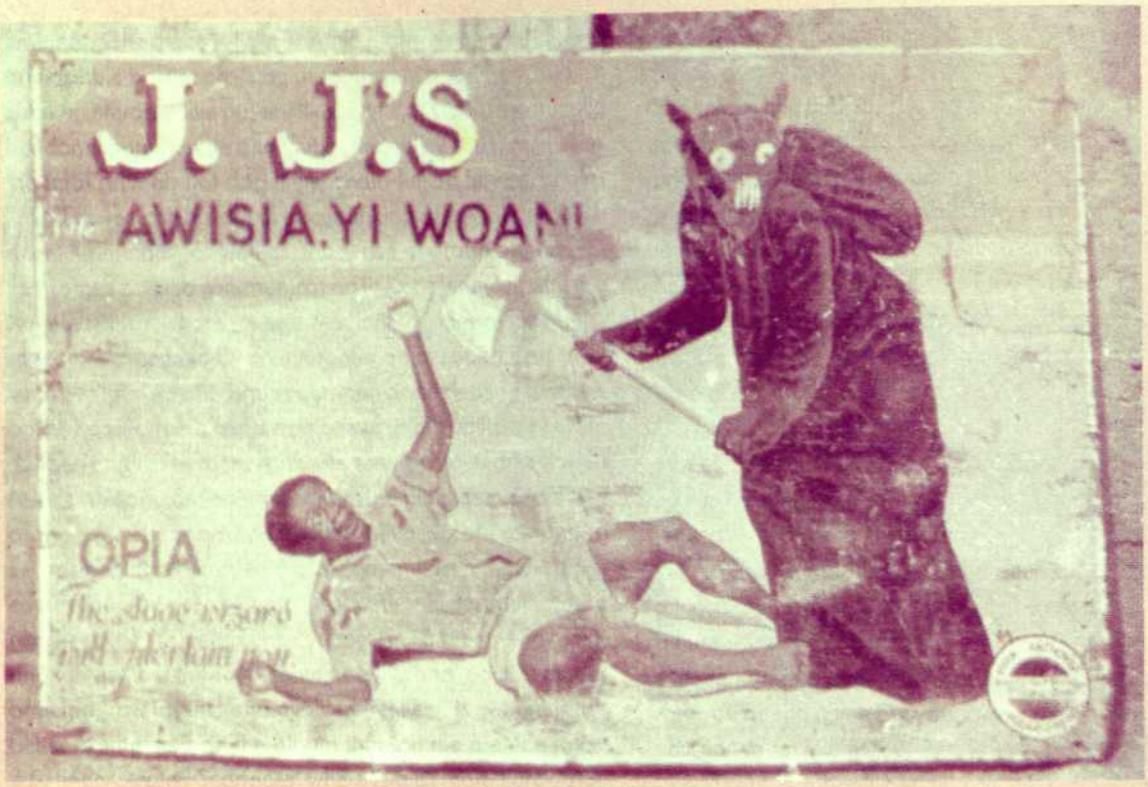
New jobs and the expansion of the education system have resulted in increased urban migration,[30] which in turn has exacerbated drunkenness[31] and prostitution:[32] all topics found in popular texts. The highlife song 'Ankwankwaa Hiani' by the Modernaires [33] is about a poor youngman who is forced to town by poverty, where he meets worse problems that the ones he left behind. In Yamoah's song –'Osigyani' [34] of the 1950s— a bachelor complains that he has turned to drink because he has no girlfriend or wife, a common plight of the poor, new urban migrant. Okukuseku's song, 'Robert Mensah', is about a Ghanaian football hero who was stabbed to death in an *akpeteshie* (local gin) bar in 1972.[35] Drunks, fast-living playboys and 'good-time' girls also commonly feature in concert party plays.[36]

Unlike the traditional social system,[37] the modern system is based on competition, open social mobility and individual achievement. This has resulted in enormous disparities in wealth and in sudden changes of fortune. However, although the plight of the poor and the appearance of a nouveau-riche is a common theme in popular text,[38] these are not usually depicted in modern terms of class-struggle, but rather in the traditional ones of morality and spiritual medicine.

Concert party plots often portray the humble and hardworking who 'suffer to gain' in contrast to lazy and immoral spend-thrifts who end up destitute.[39] Traditional medicine and witchcraft as the causes of riches and poverty is also a common theme in popular text.[40]

Ghanaian popular entertainers do not only see success or failure depending on supernatural forces, but employ these forces themselves. After a series of unlucky incidents, the highlife musician, King Bruce acquired a charm from an Ewe 'juju-man'[41]. Likewise, the Jaguar Jokers concert party had a traditional priest who annually blesses their musical instruments and had taboos on certain foods when on tour [42]. Mr. Bampoe, the leader of the Jaguar Jokers told me [43] that he had never made a highlife record because a successful recording-artist friend of his of the 1950s had actually been 'jujued' by a jealous competitor who had bewitched needles used in playing some of the man's records (i.e. sympathetic magic). Bampoe claims to have seen three such needles in his dead friend's throat.

Popular performance texts also deal with the break-up of the extended family, a rather neutral sociological phrase which does not convey the destructiveness and misery of this process which involves inheritance disputes,[44] co-wife rivalry,[45] neglected children and witchcraft accusations.



Cartoon painting of scene from Jaguar Jokers play, Awisia Y. Wo Ani, with monster attack ing an orphan boy. (Below) Mammy Wata figure from Jaguar Jokers 1970's concert party play, 'Opia in Court'.

The orphan rejected by the evil stepmother is a common theme of popular text[46] and three reasons can help explain this. First, the customary seniority arrangements between co-wives in polygamous families are being eroded (by factors such as education), leading to disputes over the allowance and inheritance to their respective children. Second, high rates of migration are causing increasing divorces and broken homes, resulting in what Ester Goody[47] calls 'crisis fostering' where a parent remarries and the child is maltreated by the new parent or guardian. Third, the orphan state itself may be a poetic way of describing the acute sense of loneliness and anomie that many feel in the big city.

Accusations of witchcraft and the use of evil poison within the family is also the subject of many highlife songs and plays.[48] To take just one example, in a long soliloquy in the Jaguar Jokers' play 'Man Needs Help' (Onipa Hia Mmoa), the co-median Opia talks of witchcraft being the cause of debt, bar-renness and sickness[49]. This follows a highlife lament by his friend, Tawia who accuses his own mother of making him a useless drunk by putting a 'grawa' (a large water-can) in his stomach.[50] Another instance is the African Brothers' most famous song of the early 1970s about the forty-year-old 'Yaw Berku,' who complains that due to witchcraft, he does not even have forty pounds to his name.

Moving away from the subject of witchcraft within the family, I will end on the subject of more impersonal supernatu-ral forces that have become popular with concert parties since the 1970s. These are the depictions of forest and water spirits.[51] Those concert parties that specialize in stage conjuring, such as those of 'Professors' De-Ago and Hindu,[52] employ midgets whom they claim to be forest dwarfs. The more standard form of concert party are also full of monsters that are depicted in

both the plays themselves and on the hand-painted 'cartoons' and eye-catching stuffed demons[53] they use for pre-show publicity.

The 1973 Jaguar Jokers play *Orphan Don't Glance* [54], contains a scene in dim red light of a satanic bat-winged 'Sasabonsum' forest spirit that attempts to axe an orphan, only to be defeated amidst thunder and lightening by three hymn-singing angels. A 1977 production by the same group entitled *Opia in Court* includes a justice dispensing ten-foot high pale-faced goddess who represents the pan-West African mermaid 'Mammy Water'.[55] More sophisticated stage demons have appeared since. For instance, the 'Kumapim Royals' Concert Party' uses day-glow paint and ultra-violet light for illuminating forest scenes of floating heads and figures of death.[56]

The recent appearance of these elaborately constructed spirits by concert parties may reflect their audience's anxieties in two ways. First, impersonal monsters dramatize fearful and unknown urban dangers that include hand-shaking witches and forest spirits coming to town. Second, stage versions of dangerous nature spirits may symbolize the general unease in a country undergoing de-forestation and pollution for the sake of rapid urban sprawl.

In short, whereas the spiritual churches use spiritual healing and exorcism to ward off and drive out evil spirits, popular performance depicts and defuses them theatrically.

To conclude: both local popular theatre and the spiritual churches reflect and articulate the anxieties of new urbanites. Both also, quite independently, attempt to alleviate and solve this angst; either through popular dance, song-text and theatrical catharsis on the one hand or sacred dance, Christian ritual drama and spiritual healing on the other.

It is therefore not surprising that with the emergence of gospel-highlife, these two distinct 20th century trans-cultural forms have recently fused together. In so doing they have created a contemporary home-grown therapy that, like the traditional Ghanaian one, combines rhythmic music, dancing participants and dramatic catharsis. What a westerner would call secular music therapy is therefore in Ghana encapsulated within sacred performance and spiritual healing.GR

Notes

1 *The Christian Messenger* newspaper, Ghana, 1990, Vol. 15.: 1 and 4.

2 Jesus Above All Studio, East Legon, and one above the Catholic Bookshop in Tudu, Accra.

3 The "Kristo Asafo Mission" has one, through which the ace comedian Nkomode passed. Conversely, the leader of F. Kenya's concert party became a prophet in Abidjan in the late 1980s and used his group for evangelical purposes.

4 A quarter of registered members of the Musicians Union of Ghana were abroad in 1979 (Collins, 1996:247).

5 See Max Asimeng (1981) for a full discussion of this.

6 Personal communication with market trader/concert actress Vida Oparebea, 2nd May 1974.

7 Togolese nationals were initially thought to be the culprits this time. The origin of this mass hysteria is thought to be the Cameroons, and it may have been part of a widespread West African phenomenon, as just in July 1997, there were reports of similar killings in Senegal.

8 Christensen, J.B.1962. " The Adaptive Functions of Fanti Priesthood". In *Continuity and Change in African Cultures*, (eds) W.R. Bascom and M.J Herskovits, University of Chicago Press, pp.257-278; Field, Margaret,1960. *Search for Security: An Ethno-Psychiatry Study of Rural Ghana.* Faber and Faber, London;Twumas, Patrick.1975, *Medical Systems in Ghana: A Study of Medical Sociology*, Ghana Publishing Corporation, Tema

9 The Anglo Native Jurisdiction/Custom ordinances from the 1880s reduced the religious role of Ewe chiefs and banned 21 cults. In 1902 the British attempted to confiscate the Golden stool, the key symbol of the Ashanti Union. The ban on 'carrying the coffin' reference was from E.F. Collins personal communication.

10 This was the title of her pioneering 1960 book that looked at 23 new Ashanti shrines and the patients who were exhibiting neurotic responses to change such as depression, anxiety and paranoia.

11 Tigari came from northern Cote d'Ivoire in 1940 (Acquah, 1958:153). Blekete (or Kundi) reached the Volta Region, via Fanti land, from the north of Ghana in 1932 (Hill, 1981, Chapt.5).

12 Twumasi (1975:20 - 3) refers to new-look traditional medical cults that compared to older ones, deal with high rates (20%) of the 'cleansing' of witches. Field (1960: 80) mentions the revival of a more benign form of the old Ashanti executioners cult, Obosum-Brafo.

13 The very first was the Fanti church of the Twelve Apostles founded in 1922. It was an offshoot of Liberian prophet Wade Harris's earlier movement.

14 Asimeng (1981:46-52) sees the growth of separatist sects as being response to urbanization, migration and the anomie of city life.

15 Baeta, C.G. 1962. Prophetism In Ghana. SCM Press, London. pp. 15-16,36.

16 ibid, pp.92

17 For the 1955 figures, see Acquah (1958:145-151).

18 1,600 religious organizations were registered with the National Commission on Cultures' Religious Affairs Department in 1991 of which 800 were Christian. (Ghana Broadcasting Corporation News, 29th December 1991).

19 See Joe Bradford Nyinah's 'Cult Culture: How it Develops Graphic newspaper, Ghana, November 18th, 1988, p.7. He also states that between 66% and 88% percent of the sects congregations are women.

20 Collins E.J. 1996. Highlife Time. Anansesem Press, Ghana.

21 For the intermediate status of Ghana popular artists, see Collins (1994: 289/90 and 292/3).

22 Catharsis was an aspect of ancient Greek ritual dance-drama (that involved Saturnalia, possession and ritual rebirth) and the later secular Greek theatre that evolved out of it.

23 These ceremonies and festivals often contain 'marginal' (van Gennep, 1960) and 'liminal' (Turner, 1967) periods of taboo breaking and license that mark ritual rebirth and seasonal renewal. Some Ghanaian example of such festivals are the Ga Homowo (see Field 1937:47), the Brong Apoo festival (see Bame, 1991) and the close of the Winneba Aboakyere deer hunt festival (see Etherton, 1982).

24 Bame K.N. 1968. "Comic Play in Ghana", in African Arts, UCLA, Los Angeles, vol.4, Summer;_____.1969. "Contemporary Comic Plays in Ghana". MA Thesis, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Western Ontario, Canada

25 Richard, Alain. 1974. "The Concert Party as a Genre: The Happy Stars of Lome". In Research in African Literatures. Vol 5, No 2, pp.165-179

26 Bame (1969) says that in a survey he conducted, 22.5% of the audience claims they weep during a play and 64. 5% says they find the play's moral helpful in their everyday life.

27 Audiences often go up to the stage to offer condolences, praises, money and food to the actors.

28 Examples are the 1954 Jaguar Jokers play *Kashele*, about a Lagosian-tricked boy; a Ghanaian woman; (see Collins, 1994:157); and the 1930 Two Bobs play *Minnie the Moocher* that involves two rice-eating Liberian "Kroo Boys" (see Sutherland, 1970).

29 Brempong, Owusu. 1984. " Akan Highlife in Ghana: Songs of Cultural Transition". Ph. D Thesis, Indiana University, U.S.A

30 By 1960, 23% of Ghanaians were urban (Asimeng, 1981:140), of which one quarter were migrants (Twumasi, 1975:52). For positive correlation between level of education and desire to move to the urban areas see Twumasi (1975:53/4).

31 See Akyeampong (1996) who deals with the emergence of young men's urban drinking clubs as far back as the 1860s.

32 See Twumasi (1975:53) on the dangers of female urban migrants becoming prostitutes.

33 Decca, West Africa. 1944. _____. 1959

34 Sonofone FAO 1520

35 Two examples that connect drinking to economic hardships are Onyina's 1956 *Ewiase Ye Me* (The world is Affecting Me) and A. B. Crentsil's early 1980's hit *Akpeteshie Seller.*

36 See Bame (1968) and Ricard (1974). For a 1950's Kwaa Mensah play on this theme see Collins (1994: 154-47 and 196)

37 For the caste-like traditional social structure see Asimeng(1981;117/8).

38 See Yankah (1984:572) and Brempong (1984: 556-60). Of the 117 highlife songs (on 78 rpm shellac record) of the COLLINS/BAPMAF collection that have been translated into English, nine are on the topic of money and poverty. (BAPMAF, the Bokoor African popular Music Archives Foundation is a NGO set up by musicians in Ghana in 1990).

39 See Bame (1985:84-7) for a synopsis of a Kakaiku play about a Cinderella-like Mansa who ends up marrying a chief. See also the 1973 Jaguar Jokers play 'Awisia Yi Wo Ani' (Orphan Don't Glance, i.e. enviously) in Barber et al (1997: 92-116).

40 See Yankah (1984: 592) on the theme of witchcraft in highlife songs. In the COLLINS/BAPMAF collection, 10 out of 117 songs are on this topic.

41 Collins E J (and Bruce, K). Forthcoming. King Bruce: The King of Black Beat. Anansesum Press.

42 Collins E J. 1994. " The Ghanaian Concert Party: African Popular Entertainment at the Crossroads," Ph. D Thesis. Department of American Studies, State University of New York, Buffalo, USA. p.135 and 423

43 ibid, pp. 131

44 This is particularly acute in the Akan areas whose matrilineal system is at odds with the imported patrilineal one of the West.

45 For co-wife jealousy in highlife songs see Asante-Darko and van der Geest (1983); and for this topic in concert party plays see 'the Jealous Rival' translated by Bame (1985:103-28).

46 For highlife songs see van der Geest (1980) and Yankah (1984). For concert plays by the Jaguar Jokers see Barbers et al (1997: 92-116), by E.K.'s Akan Trio see Collins(1996: 13/4), by the Happy stars of Lome see Ricard (1974:169 and 117) and by Ahamanodo's and Kakaiku's groups see Bame (1985), in the COLLINS/BAPMAF collection 5 out of the 117 translated songs concern the plight of the orphan.

47 Goody, Esther. 1996. " The Fostering of Children in Ghana," Journal of Sociology, vol2, pp. 26-33.

48 See Brempong (1984) for songs by Alhaji Frempong, Opambuos, African Brothers, Yamoahs, Dr. K. Gyasi and the Ramblers. Six of the COLLINS/ BAPMAF 117 translated songs on this subject.

49 Collins E J. 1994. "The Ghanaian Concert Party".pp. 10

50 Brempong (1984:243) refers to a highlife by Opambuo's Band with almost the same refrain. Akyeampong (1996: 154) refers to K. Gyasi's song 'Nsa Mennim Nom' about a family teaching a member to drink.

51 The first reference I've seen to the supernatural in concert plays is the late 1920's "Fear No Ghosts" by Williams and Marbel of Accra. However this had no elaborate costumes or sets (Collins, 1994:152/3).

52 For a description of a De-Ago show in 1976, see Collins (1994: 152/3). Professor Hindu became the 'guru' of the famous late Nigerian Afrobeat star, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, for a while in the mid 1980s. One of the very first stage conjurers was professor Kobina Segoe who became president of Ghana's first concert party union in 1960 (Collins, 1994:115/6 and Barber et al, 1997:16 - 18).

53 Brempong (1984:109) notes that during the 1970s, F. Micah's group carried a stuffed animal/supernatural creature on top of its touring bur for pre-show publicity.

54 Barber, Karin; Collins, EJ; and Ricard, Alain. 1997.

West African Popular Theatre, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, USA

55 The original 1974 version of 'Opia in Court' had no monster characters at all (Collins, 1994:141 and 127/8).

56 For a description of this 1992 Kumapim Royals play *Me Mbo Adam Nkwaa Soboo* (Don't Blame Adam Alone), See Collins (1994:168-171).

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