

## “MA LA MA WIE GA” (“I WILL SING AND SPEAK GA”): WULOMEI AND THE ARTICULATION OF GA IDENTITY IN STYLIZED FORM

by

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The problems one encounters in studying Ga music are essentially historical ones... (Hampton 1978: 31).

...the rate at which land has been alienated in Accra has made the “land problem” one of the most important and paramount issues with regard to urbanisation of the town along modern lines (Quarcoopome 1992: 40).

How should differently positioned authorities (academic and nonacademic, Native and non-Native) represent a living tradition’s combined and uneven process of continuity, rupture, transformation, and revival? (Clifford 2001: 480).

In 2001 Dan Kermah, a documentary film maker based in Ghana’s capital Accra, succeeded in arranging a video-taped performance of the pioneering Ga folk group<sup>1</sup> *Wulomei* at their founder Nii Tei Ashitey’s house, located in the Accra suburb of Mamprobi and in anticipation of Ghana’s 50th anniversary celebration as an independent nation. What made this particular recording unique were the individuals assembled that day, consisting of *Wulomei*’s foundational members who began performing together in the early 1970s. Despite some reunion concerts scattered over the years, *Wulomei* in its original form started to splinter with the exodus of their lead vocalist Naa Amanua and guitarist Nene Acquah around 1975 when they left to form their own ensemble *Suku Troupe*. Although tensions did arise during this reunion as histories resurfaced and frictions reemerged, the overall mood was joyous and the ensemble, with members like Ashitey and Acquah well into their 70s or 80s, still managed to perform as if they had never stopped playing together. That day many in the community came to see and hear what was going on, and their reactions to the sight of the original members together once again revealed the importance of *Wulomei* in the local community:

<sup>1</sup> The application of the term “folk” contrasts with the limited scholarship produced on *Wulomei* to date. Collins’ use of the term “cultural troupe” (1994a) reflects language used during his time as a performer in his own groups *Bokoar* and *Agbafoi*. Today, however, the term “cultural troupe” in Accra refers to the many drum-dance groups assembled as multi-ethnic youth dance ensembles performing “traditional” choreographed pieces from different regions of Ghana, and more recently, *jembe* pieces from the Mande area or *jembe*-inspired creative works. In Ga, *oboade lalai*—literally meaning “traditional songs”—also mark “Ga folk songs” (Hammond, 1970), but this term doesn’t capture the essence of the Ga folk music repertoire.

It was fun...all over the area people just came to see [them]. They hadn't seen them like that in all [those years]...people's eyes were full of tears that afternoon. They asked "how did you get these people together?"...They were local heroes, if you put it in that sense...I mean from those poor areas to become national heroes, to travel...they were sort of local icons. (Dan Kermah interview 12 November 2009)

Formed by Nii Tei Ashitey and Nii Adu Ofoliquaye, a.k.a "Big Boy", Wulomei developed into an ensemble that presented to Ga audiences a unique and symbolically potent display of Ga music and culture through assembling a distinct mix of local and foreign musical styles and resources, as well as Ga religious traditions. Seemingly at the edges of both Ga traditional music and the country's foremost popular music style, highlife, their appeal to audiences extended to other parts of Ghana as well. After they were established in 1972 many other groups, *Dzadzelo* or *Ashiedu Keteke* for example, formed based on Wulomei's artistic and musical model with respect to costume, instrumentation, stage presentation, style, and compositional approach.

Ga folk music also spread globally through international tours by Wulomei and others to locations within Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and North America. Back in Ghana, further developing the Wulomei model were the many children's ensembles that formed in Accra from the mid-1970s that provided musical training to youth in the city, helping to establish a generation of traditionally minded musicians who would later go on to shape the musical landscape of Accra and Ghanaian drum-dance music globally.

Today Ga folk music still occupies a space on Accra's musical landscape through bands that perform in the original style, including Wulomei or others led by a new generation of artists. Similarly, many highlife-inspired groups performing at local establishments incorporate sequences of popular Ga folk music pieces into their repertoire for foreign and local audiences. Ga folk music has even impacted hiplife, one of Ghana's most recent branches of highlife inspired by rap and hip-hop, with artists like Kaseem Bebe remixing older popular Wulomei songs for his compositions.

Local dealers in the city's primary music distribution market at Kantamanto, kiosks scattered around the city, and mobile music sellers in and around Accra still supply music enthusiasts with original or bootlegged copies of older cassettes or CDs. Outside of the local scene in Accra one can find groups in the Ghanaian diaspora performing pieces from the Ga folk music repertoire, and several internet sites and blogs online feature select tracks or albums of old releases with short descriptions of various "Ga Cultural Highlife" groups supported by photos of album covers or vinyl discs.

My own engagement with Ga folk music began in 1998 after I purchased the Wulomei cassette "*Sani Maye Eko*" while a graduate student at the University of Ghana. From this time until 2012, part of my musical activity included regular performances at funerals or other social occasions with many musicians in Accra, including the group Hewale Sounds who for much of that time were affiliated with the International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD). While an ensemble loosely modeled on the Pan-African Orchestra, many of Hewale's members grew up performing together in the group *Okotorbidja* during the mid to late 1970s while based in the Accra suburb of

Russia. Predating the proliferation of “cultural troupes” modeled off the Ghana Dance Ensemble and performing choreographed drum-dance pieces from different regions of Ghana, *Okotorbidja* was one of the many youth ensembles from Accra during that period whose repertoire was largely grounded in Ga folk music. Typically children’s ages in these ensembles ranged between 7 and 14 years, and they would often create instruments and musical equipment like amplifiers or microphone stands using milk or milo tins, vegetable oil containers, sticks, or other local materials. Groups would seek out appropriate attire and mime to vinyl recordings, or attempt to play live on these locally produced instruments. In some cases local elders in the community would take on groups they thought were particularly talented by helping to secure proper instruments and costumes, or musical training and promotion. As an extension of this important period in the musical lives of many Hewale members, their repertoire included popular Ga folk tunes that we would perform alongside other Ga drum-dance pieces like *kpanlogo*, *oge*, *gome*, or local renditions of popular highlife tunes. This and other musical experiences over the 14 years that I lived in Accra were critical to my own musical growth and helped develop my performing capacities, understanding of the genre and knowledge of the repertoire. It also offered me opportunities to meet many people whose musical lives have been devoted to Ga folk music at one time or another.

This article intends first to provide scholarly space and an accurate description of Wulomei’s emergence onto Accra’s musical landscape. To date there has been little attention devoted to Ga folk music in the academic world that could be considered commensurate with the music’s impact in Ghana. Moreover, writing about Ga folk music has been largely journalistic thereby lacking interpretation of its broader meaning and significance within the Ga community. Second, I aim to uncover how factors such as urbanization, marginalization and social transformation led to the strategic reconfiguration of heterogeneous artistic and cultural elements—foreign and local, old and new—for the purposes of promoting a Ga cultural renaissance through this stylistic and deeply symbolic artistic display (Clifford 2003: 89).

### **Historical context**

The Ga occupy a coastal region of southeastern Ghana that extends along the coast from Langma in the west to Tema in the east, and with northern boundaries stretching across the Accra plains into the Akuapem hills roughly 11 miles inland where the Ga kingdom of Ayawaso was located. Their close proximity to Akan groups in the north (Akuapem) and west (Fante) has facilitated close interaction and cultural borrowing. To the east reside the GaAdangme with whom they share many linguistic and cultural affinities, as well as historical experiences, which suggest common origins. Today Ga politics is organized around what were originally six autonomous states: Ga Mashi (Central Accra), Osu, La, Teshie, Nungua, and Tema, each with their own Mantse or “chief”. Each town is divided into *akutsei* or “quarters”, with quarters further subdivided into patrilineal houses or *wei* (Odotei 1991: 61). The autonomy of these states was compromised during the colonial period when the British passed the Native

Administrative Ordinance in 1927 that established the Ga Manste as the paramount chief of the Ga (Sackeyfio 2008: 37–38).

The large-scale migrations from the Accra plains to the coastal settlements after 1680, when the Akwamu defeated the Ga kingdom of Ayawaso, (Odotei 1995: 68–69)<sup>2</sup> added an additional layer of complexity to the nature of Ga musical and cultural change. This watershed moment in Ga history marked the beginning of an extensive period of interaction with various Akan groups through trade and annexation. Similarly, their location on the sea continued to facilitate other forms of cross-cultural interaction and influence brought on by coastal trade, urbanization, and labour migration that has left an indelible mark on Ga music and culture.<sup>3</sup> After the colonial capital of the Gold Coast was moved to Accra in 1877, and during periods of rapid urbanization during the interwar period, this feature of the Ga experience deepened. The Ga were now required to accommodate a colonial governmental infrastructure that ran parallel to their own local political institutions, the increased growth of rural-urban migration to the new capital largely from outside the Ga polity, and adjust to Accra’s new role as the political, economic, and cultural centre of the colony.

The style known today as Ga folk music initiated by Wulomei and developed by many other groups modeled off them bears the marks of the Ga’s long history of interaction, influence, and absorption. This provides fruitful terrain to explore the tensions or antinomies at the intersection of dedicated expressions of Ga artistic and cultural traditions and a soundscape that explicitly bears the marks of the Akan as well as other foreign elements. The study of Ga music presents to African-oriented ethnomusicologists an example of a music-cultural sphere fixed along ethno-linguistic lines (as with “Ewe”, “Asante”, or “Yoruba” music), but which today is also primarily an urban society with little existing urban-rural continuum through which music or cultural elements can flow in either direction. Economic, cultural or human resource flows between town and countryside have been an important part of African life and urban research on the continent since the emergence of studies investigating “folk-urban continuum” developed by the Chicago School in the 1930s (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1991). Ethnomusicologists have also identified this important interrelationship. For example, Avorgbedor’s research on Ewe *habɔbɔ* suggests that urban groups seek out musicians from the hometown to ensure musical authenticity and cultural continuity in Accra (1998: 396), while Koetting’s research on Kasena flute and drum ensembles in

<sup>2</sup> Not all Gas fled to the coast, with many seeking refuge at Aneho in the modern-day Republic of Togo that along with the town of Glidzi they founded. Aneho still occupies an important space in Ga memory, with quarters like Osu-Aneho in Accra made up of migrants from Togo, and the annual influx of Togolese to Accra from Aneho during the *Homowo* festival—both important reminders to this close cultural and historical connection.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the history of *gome* drum-dance music in Accra is rooted in labour migration. Hampton’s PhD dissertation (1977) suggests that *gome* arrived in the community of Kpehe in 1954 through labour migrants returning to Accra from working in Fernando Po. Through interviews with Squire Addo, Collins asserts that an earlier wave of *gome* arrived in Accra in the early 1900s by labour migrants returning from the Belgian Congo (1994: 98).

Accra suggests that a lack of Kasena migrant activity between Accra and home has led to a decline in musical activity (1975: 31). By contrast to these and other examples, the contemporary story of the Ga in Accra is not one of cultural retention in a new urban locale by a migrant community, but cultural continuity and assertion in the unique context of rapid social, economic, spatial, and cultural transformation.

Despite Wulomei's more than forty-year existence, there is little in the scholarly record devoted to Ga folk music. Much of what does exist centers on the seminal work done by John Collins who, in addition to his scholarly and journalistic pursuits, ran bands like *Agbafoi* and *Bookor* that shared the stage with many artists connected with the Ga folk music phenomenon. He situates Wulomei within the broader cultural and historical milieu marked by revivalist movements happening in the 1970s and as part of a longer trajectory of 'roots' or indigenization movements in Ghanaian music (1994a, 1994b, 2007). This analysis is further drawn out in his assessment of Wulomei as representing a third, conscious stage of musical or artistic decolonization beginning after WWII and an example of a broader Afro-centric movement from the late 1960s or early 1970s seen in many parts of Africa and the African Diaspora (1985, 2005). His writing is also important from a historical perspective, as he was the first to try and sketch out important moments in Wulomei's early development, as well as the motivations for their creation which, according to his interview with Nii Ashitey, was to "bring out something for the youth to progress and forget foreign music and do their own thing" (1994b: 265).

While others like Stapleton and May (1989) and Agawu (2008: 12) have also written about Wulomei to some extent, the other substantive contribution to Wulomei in print is by David Coplan (1978). He also positions the group within a larger "Afro culture" movement in the 1970s when highlife became too deeply associated with the country's colonial past. He asserts that African cultural revitalization and pan-African nationalism paved a way for groups like Wulomei to exist due to their appeal to this type of sensibility. In his narrative he discusses the appeal of Wulomei on Akan audiences, briefly describing Akan musical influences, and even going as far to suggest that "Musically, the Wulomei are modern Akans in neo-traditional Ga clothing" and that the music "...has a special appeal to an unurbanized generation seeking to return to values drawn from many indigenous traditions..." (*ibid*: 111–112). Coplan's analysis does place Wulomei within the context of Ga revitalization, but as a "multi-ethnic symbolic complex" serving a national and pan-African consciousness and mediating between the indigenous and the national.

Although Wulomei was popular throughout Ghana during their peak in the later half of the 1970s and early part of the 1980s, having emerged at time when musicians sought inspiration from local resources for artistic development (embodied in the philosophy of *Sankofa*), I am proposing that their significance lies in a Ga interpretation that is critically connected with their urban experience. As indigenous urban dwellers in the rapidly expanding and increasingly heterogeneous city of Accra, economic, political, linguistic, and spatial marginalization had become a fundamental part

of the Ga experience as a result of massive land alienation (Quarcoopome, 1992), substantial demographic shifts unfavorable to the local Ga, and a neglected local economy increasingly boxed in between the sea to the south and more affluent suburbs to the north. These factors helped to exacerbate feelings of cultural and linguistic marginalization felt by many within the Ga community, which provided fertile ground for artistic or cultural responses reinforcing or asserting features of Ga identity. It is within this historical and social context that Wulomei and the many groups modeled from them, with their complex confluence of musical and cultural resources from inside and outside, represented a potent *articulation* of Ga culture through their innovative model for artistic performance.

### **Analytical approach**

Drawing inspiration from Stuart Hall and James Clifford, the application of the term *articulation* is not motivated with the aim to generate new debate around issues of identity politics, or to reformulate the "crisis of representation", or as a kind of post-modernist deconstruction of the idea of "Ga culture", "Ga ethnicity", or "Ga music". Rather I draw on this concept as a way of uncovering the significance and meaning of a style of music performance that while explicitly Ga, deeply embraces musical resources from different parts of Ghana, and does away with dismissive terminology like "invention" or notions of "authentic" or "inauthentic".

The concept of *articulation* as an analytical prism through which to examine the significance of Wulomei within the Ga community affords a level of flexibility when assembling and interpreting the various stylistic and artistic elements that on the surface may appear contradictory to such a proposed thesis. It also adds complexity to discourses on traditional music in countries like Ghana that are typically prescribed ethno-linguistic markers and imagined in nationalist-like ways. Where we draw historical lines in the sand when musing about traditional music deeply affects the outcome of our perceptions about it. Like many types of Ga secular music identified as traditional but that bear the marks of a broad range of influences from the African Diaspora and Western/Central Africa (*gome*), American rock n' roll (*kpanlogo*), "proto-highlife" styles of urban dance music from the Fante area (*kolomashie*), or Liberian drum-dance music (*oge*), to cite a few; Ga folk music provides a compelling example for African music scholars of how interdependent and dynamic music cultures from this region are (like many other regions for that matter). Similarly, it also illustrates how a historical perspective adds complexity to the ethno-linguistic music designations that exist, allowing us to see tradition not as the sum total of a repertoire from the past and connected with rural life, but a musical approach that is as old as it is contemporary.

While an old term in the English lexicon, "articulation" as a concept and tool for cultural analysis and theorization finds roots in neo-Marxist discourses from the 1970s and 80s. More specifically, the problem of reductionism in Marxist class and economic analysis was taken up by scholars in the newly emerged field of cultural studies seeking to formulate ways of reconciling the limitations of Marx's reductive readings

of economic relations and their essential impact on all features of social life and class formation (Slack 1996: 118). Scholars offered “articulation theory” as an alternative to Marxist economic determinism, because it offered a more realistic understanding of the workings of social processes and cultural forms, and therefore meaning, to the apparent contradictions and antinomies to the complex ways social groups transform themselves under particular conditions. Inspired by Gramsci, Jamaican-born Stuart Hall thought of articulation not only in the linguistic sense—to “articulate”, or communicate fluently—but more importantly in the metaphorical sense—of an articulated truck or lorry, where the cab and the trailer become a unified vehicle out of disparate parts. In this sense, cultural forms or political discourses are articulated through a series of connections and disconnections of distinct and sometimes even seemingly contradictory elements which are not necessarily absolute for all time, and which can be reconfigured or rearticulated in different ways at particular historical moments. This doesn’t mean that they are arbitrary or free-floating, but that the results of social transformation are tied to the coalescing of fragments to create unities that are historically embedded and connected with particular historical forces. Of particular importance for Hall is that “It is not the individual elements of a discourse that have political or ideological connotations, it is the ways those elements are organized together in a new discursive formation” (Hall in Grossberg 1986: 53). Importantly, the concept of articulation for Hall and others liberated cultural analysis from issues of authenticity or inauthenticity, providing more solid ground through which to navigate the complex ways that groups transform themselves, and in many parts of the world, often “in moments of colonial stress” (Clifford 2003: 88).

Inspired by Stuart Hall and British Cultural Studies, James Clifford further built upon the concept and extended its analytical reach to ethnographic studies in the Pacific. For Clifford, aside from the linguistic connotations, articulation also marks critical “connections or joints” in cultural formations which can be hooked (articulated) or unhooked (disarticulated) at a given moment. Key here is a shift away from organic associations rooted in the term “culture” which can grow, live or die to “articulated ensembles” which may be likened to a “cyborg or a political coalition” that are pieced together at particular moments. Indeed, cultures are historically rooted and real, but that “there is no eternal or natural shape to their configuration”, which “offers a more useful way of thinking about cultural transformation and the apparent coming and going of traditional forms” (Clifford 2003: 88). Similarly, through this analytical prism, just as one should be suspect of primordial or transhistorical narratives to describe indigenous movements or cultural forms as they “tend to bypass the pragmatic, entangled, contemporary forms of indigenous cultural politics”, so too should one question a “postmodernist identity political narrative” that “appeals to ethnicity and ‘heritage’ by fragmented groups functioning as ‘invented traditions’ within late-capitalist, commodified multiculturalism” as it “brushes aside the long histories of indigenous survival and resistance, transformative links with roots prior to and outside the world system” (Clifford 2001: 472). The important feature of social transformation

or resistance is the articulation, “the non-necessary link, between a social force which is making itself, and the ideology or conceptions of the world which makes intelligible the process they are going through, which begins to bring onto the historical stage a new social position and political position” (Hall in Grossberg 1986: 55).

As an analytical tool, the concept of articulation has had less of an impact on the field of ethnomusicology save Richard Middleton’s application to the realm of popular music studies (1985), and Shepherd and Wicke’s *Music and Cultural Theory* that seeks to draw closer the seemingly disassociated fields of musicology and cultural theory (1997). Articulation theory links patterns of socio-economic formation or transformation with musical forms and their meaning which are always being mediated, and constructed or reconstructed. This approach to studying the connection between musical and social practice is more analytically sound than relying on the identification of “structural homologies” that posit “the existence of structural ‘resonances’, or homologies, between the different elements making up the culture, consciousness and social position of a particular social group” (Middleton 1985: 7). While music meanings are objectively arbitrary, they can be tenacious when assembled behind specific patterns of sound and organization thereby not making the articulative possibilities infinite, but anchored to historical moments and the desired outcomes of artists (*ibid*: 8). The social meaning behind any sort of musical or artistic articulation must also take into account its significance to listeners, who in different contexts or spaces may graft different interpretations onto a musical performance. Similarly, synchronic and diachronic perspectives shift one’s perspective or identify “...important conjunctures...and recognizing their dynamic structuring, which gives rise to a variety of transmutations, continuities and ruptures...” (*ibid*: 9). It is the link between patterns of socio-economic formation and transformation, musical forms, and their meaning that I seek to connect for the purposes of demonstrating the value of articulation as an analytical tool in African-focused ethnomusicology, to interpret the meaning and significance of Wulomei in the Ga community, and to add complexity to the processes of change and continuity in Ga music culture.

### **Ga Marginalization and Social Transformation**

As part of several phases leading up to the annual *Homowo* festival for the Ga, the one-month ban on noise-making known as *kpoofeemo* is an annual rite where Ga traditional authorities prohibit all types of noise making including drumming, playing music over public sound systems, or other forms of public “noise” in the Ga Traditional Area that is situated within the mega-city of Accra. The period of silence facilitates spiritual cleansing and reflection in anticipation of the new calendar year, and finds roots in Ga interpretations of the Old Testament where “...in quiet reverence God may be heard” (Nortey 2012: 11). There is little evidence to suggest that this annual observance had been the cause of any tensions or conflicts until the 1950s, when local businesses such as music dealers, nightclubs and other entertainment spots found that the ban negatively impacted their operations (Adamafio 1962, Klein 2011). The conflict of commerce with



custom resulted in public discussions about private/public space among the citizenry in post-colonial Accra. Concessions were made by the Ga traditional authority to allow periodic lifting of the ban in order to accommodate special events so long as the requisite rites were performed and appropriate fees paid.<sup>4</sup> May 1998 became an important moment in public discourses around this issue when approximately 50 people attacked the Lighthouse Chapel International at Korle Bu in Central Accra during this period.<sup>5</sup> During this violent attack, several congregation members were beaten and the church's musical instruments and sound equipment were seized. The individuals involved in the incident claimed that Lighthouse Chapel was in violation of the ban on noisemaking through their loud performances, often going on throughout the night, and that several complaints had been filed against them to cease during this time. In contrast Lighthouse Chapel, supported by the Ghana Pentecostal Council, claimed that the imposition of the annual ban was in violation of religious freedoms and human rights. The contestation over sound and noise in the context of the annual ban on noisemaking can be best understood as part of the larger contestation over space in Accra, with deep roots in the Ga experience of economic, linguistic, and socio-political marginalization and transformation that began to emerge when the colonial capital was moved from Cape Coast to Accra in 1877.

From the mid-nineteenth century the concept of land ownership and commoditization came to the fore in Ga politics (Parker 2000: 99), a phenomenon sharpened by the movement of the capital of the Gold Coast Colony to Accra and a decline in the slave economy that transformed local notions of "property". With the colonial administrative apparatus now situated on Ga lands, new demands were put on the Ga to come up with property to facilitate the development of government buildings, commercial firms, private residences, and space for new public works (Quarcoopome 1992: 41). After WWII, the alienation of Ga land grew with the passing of the *Gold Coast Town and Country Ordinance* enacted to provide further controls to government over the governance of land and the development of planned sites, effectively moving the decision-making process and control over land from the Ga traditional authorities to the colonial government (*ibid*: 42). As a result, the Ga State Reformation Association was set up in response to the rapid alienation of the Ga from their land; they were concerned that if the situation wasn't checked the results could be catastrophic for the next generation who would be "deprived of their rights as Ga people" (*ibid*: 44).

At the time of independence the *Ga Shifimo Kpee* ("Ga Steadfast Association") developed as an expression of the discontentment of the Ga people. Led by people like J.B. Danquah and S.G. Antor, it was not a political party as such but an organization

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<sup>4</sup> My own experiences in Accra confirm this. During the period of the noisemaking ban I sought support from the Abeka Mantse We to host an event to give thanks to Ghanaian families for hosting my students. We were required to pay a fee and purchase a bottle of schnapps.

<sup>5</sup> Lighthouse Chapel International was started by the Ghanaian physician Dag Heward Mills with a group of University of Ghana trained doctors as well as physicians and personnel from Korle Bu teaching hospital in Accra.

aligned with the CPP opposition. During an event arranged to launch the organization, an estimated 10,000 Gas came out to support the event’s theme that “strangers” or “foreigners” had taken over many parts of the economy, and were the cause of the poor housing situation in the city (Houser 1957: 3). Slogans like *Ga shikpon Ga mei anomi* (“Ga lands are for Ga people”), *Ga mei abii, nye teashi* (“People of Ga descent, arise”), and *Gboi mli gbewo* (“We are being despoiled by strangers”) provided the backdrop to the group’s outdoorings (Quarcoopome 1992: 47). The land issue was at the core of their grievances, so much so that the group even alienated themselves from several Ga chiefs in Accra, including the Ga Mantse.<sup>6</sup> This resulted from the group’s contentions that, as opposed to the Asante chiefs who had respected local control over land, Ga chiefs were complicit in the alienation of the Ga people from their land (*ibid*: 47–48). Protest songs sung during rallies of the *Ga Shifimo Kpee* and their supporters in Accra are revealing, here referencing the youth wing of the movement—the Tokyo Joes—made up of the unemployed and disenfranchised “rough political activists” (Collins 2002: 69) from the Bukom area and their characteristic haircuts:

<i>Gamei ashikpon hewo ni</i>	‘Twas for Galand
<i>Amoni akumi Tokiojo</i>	That I was given a Tokyo Joe haircut
<i>Gboi min hawo D.C.</i>	Aliens are overwhelming us D.C.
<i>Gamei ashikpon hewo ni</i>	‘Twas for Galand
<i>Amoni akumi Tokiojo</i>	That I was given a Tokyo Joe haircut
<i>Gboi min gbewo</i>	Strangers are killing us
<i>Jo brodas-ee</i>	Joe brotherhood-ee
<i>Jo brodas-ee</i>	Joe brotherhood-ee
<i>Gboi min hawo</i>	Strangers are overwhelming us
<i>Jo brodas-ee</i>	Joe brotherhood-ee
<i>Jo brodas-ee</i>	Joe brotherhood-ee
<i>Gboi min gbewo</i>	Strangers are killing us <sup>7</sup>

Land therefore became a defining issue through which to express sentiments of marginalization and disenfranchisement on the part of those outside the elite circles in the Ga community. It is important to note that the Ga are not known for promoting xenophobic tendencies, despite this type of nationalist expression during the independence period. Ga history is rife with examples of absorbing “foreigners” into their communities, as well as their political, linguistic, religious and artistic traditions that reveal the deeply inclusive nature of Ga society. This inclusiveness has colored the “pigmentation” of urban Accra, something strikingly revealed in the variety of locale names<sup>8</sup> that mark the diverse influences shaping the Ga over the past three centuries (Wellington 2002: 80). Drawing on Osaghae (2003) and Mohamed

<sup>6</sup> This is an issue within the Ga community that predates the *Ga Shifimo Kpee*. Akyeampong’s research on the development of boxing in Accra uncovers tensions over illicit land sales between urban *asafo* groups in Accra and Ga chiefs (2002: 43).

<sup>7</sup> As transcribed in Abarry 1984: 496–497.

<sup>8</sup> For example: Adabraka (Hausa – “blessing”), James Town (British Accra), Ussher Town (Dutch Accra), Awudome (Akan – “cemetery”), Mamprobi (Twi – “Royal Mausoleum”), etc.

Salih (2001), Yeboah's study (2008) of the land issue and Ga disenfranchisement identifies "emancipatory ethnicity" as an important "facilitator of democratization in Africa", where marginalized communities tap the resources of ethnicity and feelings of solidarity to overcome sociopolitical or economic injustices. Ga folk music's origins and subsequent development embody these complex sociopolitical and cultural issues governing the articulating principles that provide meaning and significance to artists and audiences.

### **Wulomei**

The basic aim of the Wulomei is to recapture some old religious aspects of the Ga-Adangbe (a tribe in Ghana)—culture and tradition in music and rhythm, which seem to be dying off. This they have succeeded in doing to a considerable and appreciable extent....It is worth noting that apart from the box guitar (un electrified) which even qualified as a local instrument, the Wulomei sounds are produced almost a hundred per cent by local instruments which add considerably to the authenticity and uniqueness of the sound (Back cover of Wulomei's first album—*Walatu Walasa*, n.d.).

The origins of Wulomei at the beginning of the 1970s was part of a broader "back to roots" or "Afro-centric" cultural movement occurring in Ghana and elsewhere. Ghana's "Soul to Soul" concert in 1971 drew important artists from the diaspora such as Tina Turner, Wilson Pickett, and Santana while Ghanaian popular groups like *Osibisa*, *Hedzolleh Soundz* and *Basa Basa* were combining western rock and funk styles with local instrumentation and musical influences.<sup>9</sup> Wulomei began experimenting and composing in a style that would serve as a local expression in this larger indigenization movement. Other examples from Ghana at this time included C.K. Mann's adaptations of "osode highlife" in Cape Coast and Koo Nimo's adaptations of "palmwine" in Kumasi.

Wulomei was initially the product of a friendship between Nii Tei Ashitey and Nii Adu Ofoliquaye, a.k.a. "Big Boy". Although they were friends, the more senior Ashitey was a mentor and father figure to Big Boy. When talking about Big Boy, Ashitey suggested that he took him as a son and played a part in his education as a drummer when he was younger (interview 12 November 2007). Big Boy also suggested that during that period Nii Ashitey "was his only friend" and that he was the best drummer that he knew.<sup>10</sup> Nii Ashitey was also at one point married to Big Boy's junior sister thereby enhancing their relationship beyond friendship to that of family as well.

Ashitey's early musical experiences were as a *konkomba* musician. Born "Nii Amartey" in Korle Gonno in 1934, his original interests were in football until his uncle

<sup>9</sup> Other parts of continent also saw these influences. For example, by the early 1970s James Brown had visited Nigeria, Fela Kuti had changed the name of his group from *Nigeria 70* to *Afrika 70* (Veal 2000: 91) and Ibadan saw the development of *fuji* music from foundational artists like Sikiru Ayinde Barrister and Ayinla Kollington (Waterman 1986: 279–280).

<sup>10</sup> Nii Ashitey's musical abilities were revealed to me in many discussions about him. For example, the guitar player Stan Plange from acclaimed groups like *The Downbeats* or the *Uhurus* claimed that when he and Ashitey played together in The Downbeats in the late 1950s, he felt that Nii Ashitey was the best bongo player in the country (interview 27 January 2010).

Kofi Addo encouraged him to play music. His initial experiences as a young musician were as a *pati* drummer in the *konkomba* group The Navy Babies. Ashitey also played in a number of dance-bands throughout his early career, performing with groups like Jeff and the ABC's and later E.T. Mensah's 2nd Tempos band in the mid-1950s. During the time of independence Ashitey went to Liberia to play drum set with a group called Tubman Stars. He spent a lot of time in Liberia, to the extent that he was able to learn the Kru language. Upon returning to Ghana he joined The Shambros Dance Band that was an orchestral ensemble before working with the Police Band, the government-sponsored Brigade Band,<sup>11</sup> and eventually the GBC Orchestra (interview 12 November 2007).

Big Boy was born in Bukom in 1945 after a set of twins. His father played *obonu* and was a master vocalist in an *asafo* group in Accra. In contrast to Ashitey's extensive background playing in dance-bands and orchestras, Big Boy's musical career mostly revolved around playing in local drum-dance groups, with the first being the group *Blema Akpoka* based out of his house in Mamprobi when he was 15 or 16. Although most of his performance experiences were rooted in “neo-traditional” drum-dance music from the Ga community, he did play congas with the dance band The Sentinals for a period of time before teaming up with Ashitey to form Wulomei. In an interview Big Boy suggested that an important motivation for creating Wulomei was in response to a radio program on the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation called “Listeners' Choice” that showcased various music styles from around the country like Fante, Ewe, Asante, Dagomba, etc. Big Boy suggested that when they would play music from the Ga he was often disappointed that many of the songs were sung in Twi, and that the program never played the types of music he would typically hear around the Bukom area where he was from. This experience led to interest in creating a style of music that might be able to fill this perceived void, an ensemble that would perform music representative of the Ga community.

“Wulomei” (sing. wulomɔ) loosely translates to “priests” in the Ga language. These ritual practitioners' traditional role was to act as a servant to a deity (sing. *jemawon*, pl. *jemawonji*) and interpreter of their will (Quarcoo 1967: 25). The symbolic potency of the name and the attire worn by the band members in performance raised eyebrows in the early period of the group's existence. It was during Wulomei's first performance on television that Saka Acquaye, an artist and musician of local fame who would later work with and deeply influence the ensemble, saw the group for the first time. He was in Koforidua working on an art-related contract with a local bank when he saw Wulomei performing on national television in 1972 (Big Boy interview 6 October 2005; Nii Ashitey interview 12 November 2007). This televised show was the first public performance for the group and was set up with the help of Bampoe Addo, also a resident in the Mamprobi area who was working with the GBC at the time. Struck

<sup>11</sup> The *Brigade Band* was a government-sponsored dance band highlife ensemble designed to promote Nkrumah and the CPP's vision for Ghana's national music, and like the Workers Brigade, to instill in youth a sense of civic pride, nationalism, gendered behavioural norms, and promote the African Personality (Plageman 2013: 169).

by their live performance, Saka Acquaye returned to Accra and approached the Ga Mantse<sup>12</sup> to inquire about the group and to confirm if in fact they were made up of Ga musicians. Saka Acquaye and Nii Amugi II (the king of Ga Mantse) were schoolmates when they were younger and therefore were good friends. This inquiry led to the Ga Mantse summoning the group to the palace to query them on their choice of band name and performance costume that explicitly referenced Ga religious authorities (Nii Ashitey interview 8 April 2010).



Figure 1. Wulomei, including all of the foundational members. This image was taken during the photo shoot for the cover of their first LP “*Walatu Walasa*” (1973). Photo courtesy of Naa Amanua.

The group met with the Ga Mantse as well as spiritual elders and representatives of the palace. The members representing the ensemble were questioned about their use of the name “Wulomei”, and if they knew about its meaning. Ashitey, apparently feeling aggravated at the time, told them that he was in fact from the *Sakumo We* (meaning: “*Sakumo* house”), suggesting to the Ga Mantse and religious leaders that Ashitey had the requisite spiritual and cultural understanding of Ga religious expression and knowledge of what the group name signified and symbolized. The importance of Ashitey’s reply lies in the fact that the *Sakumo* deity is considered very powerful, and is the “warrior guardian of the Ga people” (Kilson 1971: 127). In addition, Ashitey’s connection with

<sup>12</sup> Ga Mantse represents the apex of Ga political authority despite the fact that paramount chiefly status was alien to Ga politics prior to the imposition of colonial rule. For a deeper discussion of this issue see Sackeyfio (2008).

the *Sakumo* shrine at Tema holds greater significance as the Tema location houses the senior "cult" associated with the *Sakumo* lagoon whereas the junior one in Accra is associated with the Densu river (*ibid*: 127). Ashitey later clarified this in an interview for the *Mirror* under the title WULOMEI IN CONCERT:

The choice of the name WULOMEI for the group has set many wondering whether all the members come from fetish homes. But according to the leader Nii Ashitey, though some of his colleagues hail from fetish homes, he chose the name because he personally had long been associated with the performance of fetish rituals in his home in Tema (1 March 1974: 10).

Upon closing the meeting with the Ga Mantse it was agreed that a ceremony would be performed to officially and spiritually sanction the group's use of the name, the adoption of the wulomɔ attire, and other symbols of Ga religion. A ceremony was conducted and included a libation ritual, some prescribed offerings, and was witnessed by representatives of the seven clans that make up the original Ga state (Naa Amanua interview 3 October 2009).

As this anecdote reveals, from the very early stages of Wulomei's formation important institutions and individuals in the Ga community, like the Ga Mantse and Saka Acquaye, took particular interest to promote the ensemble and help ensure the overall success of the group. Not long after the Ga Mantse's blessing a board of directors formed to provide more direct financial and professional support. In addition to Saka Acquaye who would go on to provide the group with artistic guidance for their third and fourth albums "*Kunta Kinte*" and "In Drum Conference" respectively, other members included the Otublohum Mantse, the politician and eventual leader of Ghana General Ankrah, as well as Carl Reindorf who was a politician with the CPP (Nii Ashitey interview 20 August 2009). Wulomei's strong appeal to Ga traditional elements in their costume, musical style, and name were powerful symbols to be aligned with among formidable members of the Ga community. In this regard, Wulomei and the groups formed after them occupied a unique ideological and artistic space that was embraced by elites and an older generation in contrast to other neo-traditional music types.<sup>13</sup>

### **Instrumentation**

In its earliest manifestations, Ga folk music was built around an instrumental ensemble largely connected with local music types, and therefore musical influences from these types are revealed in the music of Wulomei and the many groups that have subsequently formed. The essential instruments included (see Figure 1.): *Nono* (bells), *Maracas* (gourd rattles), *Mi* ("*kpanlogo*" drums), sometimes groups would use the *apentemma* or conga drums, *Gome* (the box frame drum), *Osraman* (meaning "thunder"), a long

<sup>13</sup> Collins' review of popular and neo-traditional music styles identifies what he calls "the generational factor" in Ghanaian music, describing the conflict between youth and elders triggered by new music types. Examples cited include the development of *kpanlogo* (see also Salm, 2003), *kolomashie*, *konkoma* and *simpa* music from Dagbon. See also Plageman (2013) for a look at how generational tensions helped determine the evolution of dance-band highlife beginning from the late 19th century until the early post-colonial period.

cylindrical single-headed drum strapped over the player's shoulder and played with two sticks and acoustic guitar. As the genre evolved, instruments such as the bass and electric guitar, synthesizers, *jembe*, and at times the *atenteben* flute (particularly in earlier recordings of Wulomei) also found their way into Ga folk music performances and compositions. Wulomei's philosophical orientation and aesthetic principles led them to seek traditional resources for inspiration, as suggested on the back cover of their first album "*Walatu Walasa*", while the musical background of the group's initial arranger and composer, Nii Ashitey, was firmly grounded in his experiences as a dance band musician and performer with the GBC Orchestra. This interesting combination of influences and compositional approaches informed musical decisions, where local instruments were chosen as substitutes for those connected with popular genres. This is most clearly evident in the selection of the *gome* drum as a local substitute for the bass guitar, or the *osraman* that Ashitey suggested functioned similar to the *pati* side-drum in *kolomashie* or *konkomba* ensembles, or the snare drum which he played during his time with the Police Band.<sup>14</sup> The back of the album cover reveals to listeners that the only instrument in the ensemble which could be construed as foreign is the acoustic guitar, which "even qualified as a local instrument", thereby demonstrating Wulomei's intentional stress on local roots. It is this interesting combination of instrumentation resources, local and perhaps "foreign", instruments of old and those connected with modern styles like the guitar, in the creation of a composite art form that provided Ga audiences with a powerful image of Ga identity that positioned Wulomei in both the realm of traditional and popular idioms simultaneously.

### Repertoire

Wulomei's repertoire similarly drew on a range of local resources and outside influences, in addition to pieces that demonstrated the creative abilities of Ashitey and others in the ensemble in that they were simply original compositions created within this newly established musical framework. Their explicit references to Ga musical pieces added to their local appeal, but more significantly, Wulomei's contemporary compositional approach and unique artistic presentation had the effect of altering their significance or transforming their musical meaning as they took on new patterns of form, arrangement, instrumental support, and performance contexts, an important feature of the articulative process where "musical categories or elements...migrate from genre to genre, tradition to tradition, assuming new positions in different patterns, taking on varied meanings" (Middleton 1985: 13).

As an example, early pieces like "*Walatu Walasa*", "*Soyaama*", or "*Kpeshi We*" were deeply influenced by the Ga recreational musical genre *adaawe*. Often described

<sup>14</sup> *Konkomba*, literally meaning "something which has not existed before", was a type of drumming-based popular music from the 1920s. Often referred to as a "poor man's brass band", it was patronized by young men sharing the experience of migration, wage labor, and urban life in towns dotted around the Gold Coast, and later, other parts of coastal West Africa as well (Plageman 2013: 50, Collins 1994b: 16).

as “maiden songs” whose history has been traced to the 18th century, *adaawe* was originally a style of vocal music performed by women during periods of relaxation in the evenings, arranging themselves in a circle and singing to the accompaniment of handclapping. It is derived from the common compositional practice of call-and-response singing, and after taking the lead part each participant passes the role to the person on her right (Hampton 1992). *Adaawe* is not only an example of an important Ga musical genre, but its significance lies in its unique function of publically expressing the thoughts and feelings of women in Ga society:

*Adaawe* musicians compose songs or perform existing songs that interpret the tensions, conflicts, contradictions and routines of women’s everyday lives and give them meaning. Their discussions of man-made views of women and their appraisal of polygamy reveal the tensions between male and female ideas about the world (Hampton 1992: 146).

The significance of drawing on *adaawe* as a compositional and stylistic resource should be considered in light of the realities of city life by many both within and outside of the Ga community, where the daily routine of wage labour and impact of modern urban existence have the effect of cognitively distancing people from cultural resources identified as “traditional”. Questions of traditional and popular aside, presenting such musical types in the contemporary manner that Wulomei did became an effective way of presenting a form of tradition in a sophisticatedly modern, and therefore more palatable way to many who may have become disassociated from it.

Demonstrative of local resources in Wulomei compositions, consider the following example of the *adaawe* song “*Ayiwa Ei*” translated by Hammond (1970: 14) and Kropp Dakubu (1979: 101–102) and the Wulomei song “*Walatu Walasa*”<sup>15</sup> that drew on this *adaawe* piece for compositional inspiration:

*Ayiwa Ei*

*Ayiwa ei ei! ei ei!*<sup>16</sup>  
*Bɔ ni ofite mi ei saamɔ mi ei.*  
*Mɔbɔ oo, munya bi a mu som.*  
*Ayiwa ei ei! ei ei!*  
*Akɛɛ ayakpee mi ei, akɛ mi tee,*  
*Akɛ mi nyie kookoo tsei ashishi.*  
*Ayiwa ei ei! ei ei!*  
*Be ni miifo m’gbele, miifo miwala,*

*Mɔbɔ, mɔ ko bi awusa.*  
*Ayiwa ei ei! ei ei!*  
*Bɔ ni oke mi etee, oke mi aba,*

*Mɔbɔ, mɔ ko bi awusa.*

Ayiwa [a name]  
 As you have spoiled me, repair me  
 Pity oh, when you get some, keep it  
 Ayiwa  
 They said they would marry me, they went with me,  
 They walked with me under the coca trees  
 Ayiwa  
 When I am weeping for my death, I am weeping for  
 my life.  
 Pity, somebody’s child is an orphan  
 Ayiwa  
 As you have taken me, you should bring me [you  
 have pushed me around].  
 Pity, somebody’s child is an orphan.

<sup>15</sup> To hear a performance of “*Walatu Walasa*” go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YzhZuGZUiQ>.

<sup>16</sup> The translation of the piece omits the chorus’ response (*asafo*) that repeats the lead cantor’s lines (*boma*).



<i>Ayiwa ei ei! ei ei!</i>	Ayiwa
<i>Obɔ ajwamaɲ oma sigareti ei,</i>	You practice prostitution and hand out cigarettes
<i>Polisi oo, munya bi a mu som.</i>	Police oh, when you get some keep it. <sup>17</sup>
<b>Walatu Walasa</b>	
<i>Ayiwa ei ei! ei ei! Ayiwa</i>	
<i>Me re su mi wuo nu na mi re su mi kra.</i>	I am crying at my death and I'm crying at my soul.
<i>Mo broo, nya bia mu somu.</i>	It's sad, you get some you hold it.
<i>Ayiwa ei ei! ei ei!</i>	Ayiwa
<i>Me re su mi wuo nu, na mi re su mi kra.</i>	I am crying at my death and I'm crying at my soul
<i>Walatu Walasa, nya bia mu somu.</i>	Dig it yourself collect it yourself, you get some you hold it.
<i>Nipa baaku ee</i>	One person
<i>Walatu Walasa, nya bia mu somu.</i>	Dig it yourself collect it yourself, you get some you hold it.
<i>Oo miiku miye denio oo?</i>	Me alone what will I do?
<i>Walatu Walasa, nya bia mu somu.</i>	Dig it yourself collect it yourself, you get some you hold it.
<i>Enuanom ee, edu nu ye ee</i>	My brothers/sisters, ten is good
<i>Walatu Walasa, nya bia mu somu.</i>	Dig it yourself collect it yourself, you get some you hold it.

“*Walatu Walasa*” became the title track for Wulomei’s first album, and according to Ashitey was written in 1973 in support of the Acheampong regime and its promotion of self-reliance programs like Operation Feed Yourself (OFY) and “One-Man Contractors”. According to Collins:

This was also a time when large numbers of workers were employed by the government to build drains in Accra. However, the workers who were doing these various digging works did not like the expression Wulomei had coined, as they claimed that members of the public interpreted it to mean “if you are removing what you have already dug then you are making double work for yourself and therefore must be an idiot”. “*Walatu Walasa*” became transformed into a patronizing term directed at the labour class (Barber, Collins and Ricard 1997: 116).

Meaning embedded in the song “*Walatu Walasa*” is multiple and varied, with listeners unfamiliar with local forms of Ga musical expression perhaps drawn to the piece’s aesthetic beauty and subsequent extra-musical connotations, or perhaps even aware of its uniquely “Ga” sound, while listeners familiar with Ga musical types grafting additional interpretive qualities onto “*Walatu Walasa*” due to its explicit reference to *adaawe*. The referential scope of the piece is broadened by the lead singer Naa Amanua’s vocal performance, who on the album cover is described as a having a “personal voice expression like M. [Miriam] Makeba”, and backed by a chorus of dominantly female voices singing in the same characteristic responsorial style. The sonic template provided by the guitar melodic line supported by the *gome* which provides a solo near the end, the *kpanlogo* bell part characteristic of local pieces in duple meter, *osraman* supporting

<sup>17</sup> Translation from Kropp Dakubu (1979: 102)

with rhythmic punctuation, *maracas* emphasizing the downbeat, and rhythm of the palm-drum all coalesce to create the mood and meaning of the piece.

Ga folk music also explicitly draws on other well-known folk genres and music types. Songs like Wulomei's "Kaafo"<sup>18</sup> found inspiration in *Abifao Wolemo Lalai* or "Baby Songs" (lullabies), "Kwani Kwani" from the album "Kunta Kinte" based on a popular hide-and-seek song, or another early group *Abladei's* piece "Yee Ye Ye" that is based off a song sung at the Twins Yam Festival by the Ga Mashie that occurs yearly before the *Homowo* festival. In Ga tradition, twins were originally a sign of bad luck and killed before these customs were altered and replaced with this social and spiritual event that is celebrated on the Friday before the *Homowo* celebration.<sup>19</sup> Other *neo-traditional* pieces like *gome* or *kpanlogo*, pieces that describe both a style of music and type of instrument, for example, find their influences in Ga folk music composition due to the status afforded to them in Ga music culture, and as a result of their essential inclusion in the music as instrumental resources.

Ga folk music generally relies on two distinct macrostructures as the basis for their compositions. First is an alternating structure that is more open in its orientation, where the composition alternates between verse/chorus and interlude sections throughout the piece. This basic structure is often preceded by and completed with introductory and concluding material respectively. The number of times alternating sections can be performed is at the discretion of the ensemble, and in live performances means they can easily open up the piece for extended periods of time by repeating the verse/chorus and interlude materials, or by inserting new ones. In songs that are based on common drum-dance pieces like *kpanlogo*, for example, the ensemble can seamlessly move from their pre-composed arrangement to an extended section where they could introduce *kpanlogo* songs for the audience to dance and sing along to. This could also be a moment to include extended instrumental solos, or allow the singers to move to the dance floor to perform a combination of choreographed or solo movements. In such instances Wulomei and others broke from the common conventions of popular music performance where the stage acts as the barrier between the ensemble and the audience by moving off the stage and allowing audience members to participate. Gifted dancers would be able to display their talents and knowledge of Ga musical idioms, while well-known drummers in the audience would be permitted to join the group to support the dance solos.<sup>20</sup>

Second is a more symmetrical structure that includes a solo or interlude section preceded and anteceded by sections containing verse or chorus material. At either

<sup>18</sup> Nketia includes a transcription of this piece as part of his examples of "Three Ga Cradle Songs" in his seminal article on the fundamentals of Ga music (1958: 25).

<sup>19</sup> For a full and comprehensive account of the origins of the Twins Yam Festival see Nortey (2012).

<sup>20</sup> I've witnessed many performances where members of other Ga folk or drum-dance ensembles graced the stage for periods of time to support the group, particularly for community performances where the ensemble may play for several hours. This is in keeping with the norms of secular or sacred drum-dance performances where musicians are changed periodically to ensure the requisite level of musical intensity in support of an event.

end of this structural spectrum is an introductory section outlining the rhythmic and melodic contour of the piece, as well as an ending based on a refrain from verse or chorus materials already developed at the beginning of the song, or based off material introduced after the solo/interlude section. This form approximates typical popular song compositional practice. These two basic approaches to song composition are in line with a musical ethos that is grounded in both traditional and popular musical idioms and reflects the mixed musical experiences of Wulomei group members. One can find few examples of pieces that depart from this basic approach, particularly on Wulomei's fourth album "In Drum Conference" where the ensemble, led by Saka Acquaye, began deeper experimentation and exploration with the thematic, instrumental, and compositional norms that had become characteristic of the genre up until that time.

Explicit references to Akan and other "outside" music types are also a characteristic feature of Ga folk music compositional practice, particularly through the prominent use of Akan guitar band highlife that is deeply rooted in Wulomei's style. This type of highlife developed in the early part of the 20th century through a few different streams, including the diffusion of coastal "proto-highlife" styles like *adaha*, and later *osibisaaba*, *ashiko* and *konkoma* into the hinterlands of the Akan areas that led to the emergence of *odonson* and *atini*, otherwise known as the "Ashanti Blues" (Collins 1994b)<sup>21</sup> that were typically in 12/8 meter. This in contrast to Akan guitar band music with foundations in coastal "palmwine" styles like "Yaa Amponsah", "Fireman" or "Dagomba" constructed in the major scale and played in 4/4.

Wulomei's popular song "Gyae Nsa Nom" ("stop drinking"), appealing to listeners to abstain from drinking alcohol and attend to their affairs, is not only composed completely with Fante text but also borrows from Akan female musical traditions like *nwomkoro* from the Asante region or *adzewa* from the Fante area that are harmonically structured around alternating between two modes built on the first and second degrees respectively as seen in Figure 2.

The guitar part is performed in the Akan *odonson* style, and is one of many examples of how guitar band highlife has influenced Ga folk music composition (Aning 1968, Nketia 1973, Damptey 2010).

Evolving relations with the Akan has profoundly shaped Ga history and significantly impacted many aspects of contemporary Ga culture, including their political, religious, and musical lives. In many respects this had to do with the military supremacy of the Akan states in the pre-colonial period, most notably from the 1660s until the end of the 19th century from the Akwamu, Fante, Akyem, and the Asante (Kropp Dakubu 1997: 113). The long history of extensive interaction is still evident in Ga religious life where deities of Effutu, Akuapem and Fante origin assert their powers in the Ga spiritual world (Odotei 1995: 67), or in the political sphere where Akan influence helped to

<sup>21</sup> For a comprehensive look at the development of proto-highlife music types see Plageman (2013).

transform the coastal Ga polity from a theocracy to a chieftaincy-based system where power is symbolized through stools and other forms of regalia.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 2. Example of modal harmonic structure from Wulomei’s “*Gyae Nsa Nom*”.<sup>23</sup>  
(Transcription by author).

Akan musical forms have not only enriched Ga folk music compositions harmonically and melodically, but structurally as well through the periodic inclusion of Akan instruments (like the *atenteben*<sup>24</sup>), use of time structures, and more loosely through melorhythmic procedures<sup>25</sup> connected with particular drum-dance forms that are typically interpreted through the common orchestration described earlier. Returning to “*Gyae Nsa Nom*”, while the song is connected to Fante *adzewa* it is built off an asymmetrical timeline pattern played by the bell that is characteristic of Akan pieces like *kete* (Figure 3). In this respect, the combination of Akan elements from different drum-dance forms suggests that primary concern from a compositional perspective was not strict fidelity to a particular musical type, but an approximation through drawing on salient compositional procedures. Similarly, pieces like Wulomei’s “*Bobolibobo*” and compositions from other groups have drawn on the Fante *apatampa* bell pattern whose roots are closely connected to that of *adzewa* (Figure 4).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Kilson states that “nomenclature, paraphernalia, and ritual associated with chiefly institutions are based on the Akan model: Akan terms constitute the appellations associated with Ga political offices, Akan drums and music are played at Ga political ceremonies, the *asafo* military structure is thought to have been borrowed from the Fanti, and many symbolic articles associated with chieftaincy such as umbrellas, gold ornaments, and kente cloth are regarded as Akan in inspiration” (1971: 13).

<sup>23</sup> To hear a performance of “*Gyae Nsa Nom*” go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksb2pEuMLNo>

<sup>24</sup> While an instrument connected with the Akan, the Ewe musicologist and national icon Dr. Ephraim Amu altered the construction and playing technique of the modern *atenteben* to transform its tone and playing technique. During their time at the University of Ghana, Nana Danso Abiam and Henaku-Pobi further developed the performance practice on the modern *atenteben* to increase the instrument’s melodic range and virtuosity.

<sup>25</sup> I borrow the term “melorhythm” from Meki Nzewi (2007: 136–137) to privilege both the rhythmic and melodic implications of drumming patterns in all types of drum-dance music found in Ghana and elsewhere on the continent.

<sup>26</sup> Several scholars have acknowledged Akan musical influences on the Ga. For example, although originally functioning as music for women involved with the *asafo* organizations, today *adowa* can be found at funerals and sung in Akan dialects. Hampton states explicitly that “...*adowa* is,



Figure 3. “Kete” bell pattern in triple meter.



Figure 4. “Apatampa” bell pattern in triple meter. (Transcriptions by author).

The apparent tension found between strong connections with Akan and other foreign music elements on the one hand, and my claim to Wulomei’s symbolic significance in the Ga community on the other hand, referred to as an “internal contradiction”, is reconciled when one considers how musical meaning is constructed in complex societies like that of the Ga in Accra. Ultimately musical meaning is assembled and affixed onto artistic products by people who consume them, with no essential connection between a type of music, style of composition, use of harmony, timbral quality, or treatment of rhythm, and the signification people ascribe to it. There are examples of musical styles or genres that over time do achieve this sort of musical and social coherence, but what is more important in this respect is that:

...coherence is ‘unnatural’ – the product of cultural work; that musical units are assemblages of elements from a variety of sources, each with a variety of histories and connotation-clusters, and these assemblages can, in appropriate circumstances, be prised open, the elements re-articulated in different contexts. Sometimes internal contradictions are obvious...At other times they are relatively hidden, smoothed over by extensive cultivation, familiarity and the techniques of what Bourdieu called ‘legitimation’, only to be revealed when constituent elements are wrenched away and placed in a new setting (Middleton 1985: 13).

Wulomei presented to audiences an image of Ga culture and heritage within a context of a modern performing ensemble, and whose imagery and musical references promoted a sense of shared cultural heritage among Ga and Adangme people who held the group in high esteem. Wulomei kept many musical elements associated with the Ga such as the core instrumentation, common bell structures, and references to Ga sacred or secular musical forms. They also drew inspiration from Akan guitar-band music, Akan traditional styles like *adowa* or *kete*, Akan harmonic structures, and the important additions of the guitar and *atenteben* that contrasted significantly with many Ga neo-traditional styles. However, instead of these adaptations serving to dilute or undermine its value as an explicitly Ga

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in fact, a product of Ga-Akan interaction” (1978: 33). Additionally *obonu* is the Ga adaptation of the Akan *fontomfrom*, and according to Nketia the Ga switch to Twi or Fante in the performance of speech-mode drumming as “...there doesn’t appear to be an established tradition of drum language based on Ga” (Nketia 1958: 25) —although this is no longer the case as one can find many examples of speech-mode drumming based on Ga. While Nketia points out the “common ground of Akan and Ga forms in the music of recreation” (*ibid.*: 26), this doesn’t appear to be the case with music types like *kpanlogo*, *gome*, *oge*, or even more contemporary choreographed drum-dance forms like *fumefume* that are distinctly Ga.

musical expression, these seemingly foreign elements are stabilized or "smoothed over" by a long history of Ga adaptation of Akan musical and cultural elements as well as the overt and powerful references to Ga traditional culture and symbolism.

### **Costume and religious symbolism**

Another important component to Wulomei's style and presentation was their unequivocal reference to Ga religious expression, most strikingly through costume and something copied by most groups that subsequently formed in the wake of Wulomei's commercial success as part of their stage imagery. Recall that the coastal Ga were originally theocratic, therefore taking on the persona of priests and priestesses also carried political connotations as well. Male group members wore the characteristic white *adasaa* trousers worn by Wulomɔ that is typically given to prospective initiates by his paternal family during their initiation that includes three weeks of seclusion (Kwakye-Opong 2011: 157). Wulomei were strategic with their use of colour symbolism, and would change their white dress for yellow if performing in front of local religious leaders, further demonstrating their depth of understanding and reverence towards Ga religious expression. Group members would perform on stage bare footed, a requirement of all religious authorities in contrast to Ga chiefs who like the Akan wear sandals as one of the representations of their political authority. *Afili* wrist bracelets symbolizing priestly status were also characteristically worn on a priest's right hand, normally first worn during the process of initiation on the third day. So important are the *afili* in establishing a priest that they are removed from the wrists of individuals if they are to be stripped of their unique role in Ga society. Wulomei's status as the original Ga folk group formally blessed by the Ga traditional authorities is marked in their lone use of the *kotofai* head dress, or "frilly cap", that is spliced together from 365 pieces of cloth marking each day of the Christian calendar. The pieces are arranged on the hat to create seven edges to represent the seven waves of the sea (*ibid*: 156). Other groups refrained from wearing the headdress due to its particular significance in Ga religious expression (Nii Kwadjah Dodu interview 19 September 2009).

The integration of dramatic elements into performances that reference local spiritual practices also became a feature of the Wulomei's live shows, something copied by other Ga folk groups that followed them. For example, before taking the stage the ensemble would form a line and enter the performance area in a procession-like manner while singing and playing bells. This dramatic entrance carried strong religious connotations and was congruent with their embrace of Ga traditional religious elements, thus adding a sense of excitement and intensity to their performances. This was particularly so in a post-colonial religious environment where Christianity predominates, providing a type of counter-narrative to members of the Ga community and Ghanaians more broadly through this unambiguous embrace of Ga religious expression.

### **Song lyrics**

Thematically, song lyrics from Wulomei and other Ga folk groups reference a broad range



Figure 5. Album cover of Wulomei's third LP "Kunta Kinte" (1978), released by Philips (6354 022)

of topics such as love, marriage and relationships, character, or death and lamentation. Commonly found in many popular or local music types, themes such as these resonate with many Ghanaians. By addressing issues of everyday life, Wulomei's music became popular around the country. While most pieces are sung in Ga or GaAdangme, as with "Walatu Walasa" and "Gyae Nsa Nom" there are many examples of pieces written in Twi or Fante, or songs that mix Akan with Ga text. Despite the choice of Twi as an important language for composition, the Ga identity is still commonly signified to local listeners by the vocalist's inflections that mark the singer's Ga origin.<sup>27</sup>

An important framework for understanding the lyrical content of Ga folk groups lies in the Ga tradition of *kpashimo*.<sup>28</sup> This is a tradition associated with the Ga areas of La and Teshie, and is characterized as a singing tradition earmarked for social commentary or lampooning members of society that are normally exempt from such acts. However, *kpashimo* is bound within the context of the *Homowo* harvest festival thereby regulating the frequency of such performances. There are two types of *kpashimo*—a more mild type for nobility oriented on other drum-dance singing forms called *Amlakui-Akpa* ("kpa dance of the nobility"), and the *kpa* that is a type of ridicule or insult singing directed at both elite and common members of the Ga community who are called out for committing acts of indiscretion. As with similar vocal forms

<sup>27</sup> Nketia's research in the 1950s suggested "The language of Ga songs is not always in Ga. It may be Ga, Akan (Twi/Fante) or a mixture of the two." (1958: 27) while the linguist Kropp Dakubu's research has involved Ga communities connected with Akan quarters in Accra (i.e., Otublohum) where the shift from Twi to Ga has been more recent, during the middle of the 19th century (1972: 47). The inclusion of Akan or other foreign terms has become an important feature of many Ga songs, with characteristic devices such as substituting Akan terms for Ga ones when expressing vulgarities or difficult emotions common in Ga compositional practice.

<sup>28</sup> I am indebted to Oh! Nii Sowah for his insights in this regard (interview 16 October 2009).

found in other ethno-linguistic groups, like the Ewe *halo* dramatic form (Avorgbedor 1994), this type of performance momentarily suspends asymmetrical power relations among members of Ga society and is designed to compel people to live better lives. Typically this form of *kpa* begins with songs aimed at members of the elite or nobility, sometimes including heads of state or others connected with national politics, before engaging in songs directed at individuals. Tradition demands that those who are called out through song offer a gift to show their appreciation (Osabu-Kle 2009).

Although Wulomei’s song texts do not exhibit much tendency to expose the wrongdoings of individuals in the Ga community, as I will demonstrate below, the dimension of social commentary is an important feature of the lyrical content, something informed by the tradition of *kpashimo*. With very few exceptions, Ga folk music lyrics tend to be very sympathetic to power both on the local and nationalist level, and perhaps a reason why local leaders had little difficulty embracing them. The lone example from the data I collected that carries any political connotations at the nationalist level is Wulomei’s song “*Esebaafo*” from their third album “*Kunta Kinte*” that includes a veiled stab at the Akyeampong regime, a shift in attitude from the title track of their first album “*Walatu Walasa*” that celebrated their early reign.

While rhetorical, we do find difficult questions posed to historically important Ga political authorities in the popular Wulomei song “*Tswa Omanyé Aba*”<sup>29</sup> (“Strike, Peace Should Come” or sometimes translated as “Hail to Good Tidings”), among Wulomei’s most iconic pieces whose title is rooted in a common phrase said in the context of libation prayers connected with life cycle or other important events in the community. “*Tswa Omanyé Aba*” is a powerful song that references important Ga kings and events in Ga history, and facilitates a reflective pause among listeners to think about where the Ga people have come from, and where they are going.

<i>Wɔ blema Nii Okai Koi</i>	Our ancestor Nii Okai Koi
<i>Wɔ blema Taki Tawia</i>	Our ancestor Tackie Tawia
<i>Blema Kojo Ababio (oo)</i>	Ancestor Kojo Ababio
<i>Nye wolei nye nijii aɔ</i>	You have to wake up
<i>Nye webii mii gbo</i>	Your people are suffering
<i>Aso nye hɔɔ wɔ?</i>	Did you sell us?
<i>Dani nye gboi lo?</i>	Before you died?
<i>Aso maɲ ko eye wɔ nɔ</i>	Did any country colonize us
<i>Dani nye gboi lo?</i>	Before you died?
<i>Tɛ nye kɛ blofo-mei wie tɛɲɲ</i>	What did you discuss with the whites?
<i>Ni nmene ame baa hɔɔwɔ loo?</i>	And today they have sold us?
<i>Tswa shi noko mba</i>	Hail there is an impending danger
<i>Tswa nye hereawɔ</i>	Hail deliver us
<i>Tswa omanyé aba</i>	Hail good tidings

“Historical nostalgia” is an important mechanism through which the Ga reflect on their shared past to assess and contemplate their present circumstances (Odamtten

<sup>29</sup> To hear a performance of “*Tswa Omanyé Aba*” go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVzXYWsWPeo>.



2015: 69). Arranged in the form of a libation calling on Ga ancestors, “*Tswa Omanyeye Aba*” references former leaders who ruled during important moments that profoundly shaped Ga history. Songs such as this are deeply connected to a larger group of “sung oral traditions” embedded in the spiritual practices of *kple* and others, or performed during prayer or other ritual observances (*ibid.* 5).

Okai Koi (died 1660) ascended to the throne at a young age after his mother, Naa Dode Akabi, was removed from her position as king of the Ga and buried alive. Akabi was an Obutu princess who married King Mankpong Okai before delivering the Okai Koi, and who in oral and written accounts was said to have been a terribly wicked ruler. According to Reindorf, for many years the identity of Akabi was kept from Okai Koi until one day an older woman revealed the circumstances of his mother’s death—leading to the common expression *Moko lee moni fo Okai Koi* (“No one knows who begat Okai Koi”). From that day forward Okai Koi ruled with an iron fist along with his children who were known for their harsh treatment of people (Reindorf 1895: 19–20). The death of Akabi and Okai Koi marked the beginning of Akwamu rule in 1670 and the collapse of the Ga settlement of Ayawaso, thus the beginning of Akan dominance over Ga political affairs.

Taki Tawia (1862–1902) and Kojo Ababio IV (1892–1938) are connected with the British colonial experience up until the time of independence in 1957, and therefore a different form of subjugation over the Ga people. Taki Tawia was among those who began the process of transferring large blocks of land over to the colonial authorities thereby setting in motion the process of land alienation. This was also the moment in Ga history where political power along the coastal settlements was fully transferred from priests to chiefs, and so the erosion of priestly power and control over land was a complimentary phenomenon that occurred under Tawia’s rule (Sackeyfio-Lenoch 2014, 43). Tawia was vocal in his opposition to the implementation of British common law on the people of Accra, and this adversarial relationship with the British colonial authorities led to his removal from office and deportation to Elmina in the 1880s. Kojo Ababio IV was not a Ga Mantse but the chief of James Town—a division of the Ga state that during his reign was under British authority. His rule represented a period of stability in local affairs until his death in 1938 that created a political vacuum and subsequently a series of chieftaincy disputes.

“*Tswa Omanyeye Aba*” is a composition often cited by connoisseurs as being among Wulomei’s most beautiful and profound pieces, and impromptu cassette or radio performances in places like local drinking establishments rarely fails to bring out impassioned interpretations or renditions among familiar patrons. Like other songs from the “traditional” music repertoire that have historical depth, “*Tswa Omanyeye Aba*” has layers of meaning or interpretation to them in their contemporary contexts. They can be taken literally—so in this case as a kind of critique of colonization rooted in the Ga historical experience through the use of rhetorical questioning and libation phraseology. But the song’s power also lies in its ability to become a metaphor for the contemporary experience among listeners in the Ga community marked by economic

hardship and a sense of dislocation, concluded with a call to the ancestors for spiritual, moral, and real world support in trying times.

Language politics has been an important way in which space has been contested in Accra, and an issue that has also made its way into Wulomei compositions. In October of 1991 newspaper reports confirmed rumors of a move by the La Mantse to rename the settlement of Madina near the University of Ghana to “*La Hee*” or “New La”. Although there were many internal political issues interpreted in this move, this was an attempt to reassert control over land the La Mantse had lost due to the demographic shift and massive urbanization of the area. Even the name “La”, for which the La Mantse presides over, was changed from the popularly known “*Labadi*” due to similar exercises in spatial renaming (Kropp Dakubu 1997). Other examples of such acts of spatial reclaiming, or attempts at it, can be seen in the 2004 decision by the New Patriotic Party (seen to be a party of the Akan) to rename Accra Sports Stadium to “*Ohene Djan*” after Ghana’s first Minister of Sports, to the outrage of some in the Ga community including the Accra Metropolitan Assembly and Ga Traditional Council who felt that the Akan name was inappropriate for a stadium located in Accra. These examples speak to the continued feeling of marginalization on the part of the Ga community in Accra, being played out at the intersection of the cultural and linguistic domains, and the “coming to grips” with the fact that in many parts of Accra Ga has lost its status as a *lingua franca*.<sup>30</sup> Wulomei’s song “*Mala Ma Wie Ga*”<sup>31</sup> (“I Will Sing and Speak Ga”) from their first album touches on this theme of language:

<i>Akee shika tsemei tawo ablekuma (ee)</i>	They said rich men are looking for people
<i>Ohiafoi tawo ablekuma (ee)</i>	Poor men are looking for people
<i>Akee ablekuma aba kula maabii</i>	They said people should come and take care of some people’s children
<i>Maabii yoo yoo maabii yoo yoo</i>	People’s children yes yes, people’s children yes yes
<i>Mala ma wie Ga (ee)</i>	I will sing and speak Ga
<i>Mi wiee Awusa</i>	I will not speak Hausa
<i>Nmene mala ma wie Ga (ee)</i>	Today I will sing and speak Ga
<i>Mi wiee Awusa dɔɔɔ</i>	I will not speak Hausa again
<i>Mala ma wie Ga (ee)</i>	I will sing and speak Ga
<i>Mi wiee Awusa</i>	I will not speak Hausa
<i>Gbele ni gbe mi nye awoo (oo)</i>	Death that killed my mother
<i>Hela ni mo n’tsa ataa</i>	My father’s illness
<i>Ame ke ablekuma aba kula maɔɔɔ</i>	They said people should come and join them
<i>Mami o yoo yoo</i>	Oh mother

<sup>30</sup> Kropp-Dakubu’s research (1997) investigates the competition in Accra for linguistic space, suggesting that the increasing urbanization and interethnic contact has created a growing feeling among the Ga population of their linguistic marginalization in favour of the Akan language: “After centuries of surviving by absorbing and adapting, so it thought, the Ga language actually seems to be declining in some of the traditional strongholds, especially in Accra” (11).

<sup>31</sup> To hear a performance of “*Mala Ma Wie Ga*” go to [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y\\_Jm13h5YaY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_Jm13h5YaY).

The opening four lines of the song reference a libation phrase that states “*Ablekuma abakuma wɔ*” or “let the foreigners be planted among us”, referring to the long history of absorption of other ethnic groups into Ga and the generation of Ga identity out of heterogeneous elements. Ga scholars have recognized this feature of Ga society where “the homogeneous features of the society have grown out the heterogeneous fusion of many borrowed culture forms from their neighbours” (Akropong 2006: 141). Often times when this section of the libation is recited in contemporary contexts some cynically suggest that the prayers have been answered, referring to the demographic shift and resultant linguistic marginalization that has occurred in the Ga traditional area. “*Mala Ma Wie Ga*” opens in free form, and Naa Amanua’s vocal style gives the piece a lamentation-type quality to it that facilitates reflection in the listener. Following the opening section the piece is built around the title phrase that is either sung by the lead vocalist or used as the refrain performed in responsorial style as Naa Amanua weaves the other textual elements around it. “I will sing and speak Ga, I will not speak Hausa” is a profoundly powerful statement that is an explicit assertion of Ga identity and call to listeners in the Ga community to be proud of their language in a linguistically heterogeneous environment. An ensemble loved by Ga and non-Ga alike, the song embraces Ganesha while resisting cultural chauvinism, and is a message for the Ga community that resonates across other ethno-linguistic groups in post-colonial Ghana.

### **Conclusion**

As indigenous urban dwellers in Ghana’s economic, political and cultural capital, an important part of the Ga experience since the late 19th century has been the gradual sense of marginalization and social transformation resulting from rapid urbanization that I argue were important factors one must consider in the development of Wulomei. A group that selectively drew on Ga religious expression, musical forms, instrumentation, and culture-specific thematic materials in texts and stage performance, their style and music had a particular appeal to Ga audiences and was embraced by Ga elites as well as political and religious authorities. Their inclusion of “outside” musical influences from the Akan and elsewhere, however, was an equally important artistic resource that has helped define the style of Ga folk music, thereby adding complexity to the construction of musical meaning and signification. Reconciling the apparent tensions between these musical influences in the creation of a powerful sonic representation of Ga identity, I have drawn on the concept of *articulation* as a tool for shedding light on the complex ways by which cultures adapt, evolve, or respond to the pressures of socio-economic transformation. It is not the individual musical or extra-musical components of Wulomei’s presentation that carried the symbolic, ideological or political connotations as much as it was how those ingredients were innovatively assembled together to create a new symbolic-aesthetic model that embodied the experiences of many people in the Ga community (Hall in Grossberg 1986: 53). This is the essence of articulation, a configuration of heterogeneous elements, old and new, foreign and local, with the purpose of promoting *cultural continuity* in a period of social and structural

transformation (Clifford 2003: 89). As time went on, Ga folk music saw the emergence and collapse of many groups built off the same design, and a generation of youth in Accra whose formative musical experiences would be spent developing their capacities in Ga folk groups during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

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