

KOO NIMO: A CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN MUSICIAN

by

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Koo Nimo and the Kumasi *Adadam* Trio, c. 1969. L to R: Kwao Sarfo, bottle, Koo Nimo, guitar, J.K.Barwuah, *prempresiwa*

recreational bands which featured solo and group singing and a variety of drums and idiophones.

The subtle tonalities of the Asante-Twi language and the harmonies of indigenous song deeply impressed Kwabena. His maternal grandmother sang indigenous songs in a “modal, moody, bending” style. His mother often sang *abibindwom*, vernacular Christian poetry set to indigenous melodies, at home and in church. At funerals she

Daniel Kwabena Amponsah, known professionally as Koo Nimo, was born on October 3, 1934 in Ofoase, a village near Kumasi, capital of the Ashanti Region of modern Ghana. His mother, Akua Forkuo, was a farmer, cloth trader, homemaker, and a chorister at the local Methodist church. His father, Kwame Amponsah, was a farmer, tailor, mason, and musical amateur who played the trumpet in the Ofoase brass band.¹

During his childhood in Ofoase, young Kwabena was exposed to a mix of musical styles characteristic to Akan-speaking villages in the Gold Coast colony during the 1930s.² He played the *asratoa*, a pair of plum-sized gourd rattles attached to a string, with which Ghanaian children practice intricate rhythmic patterns.³ He made his own drums by fixing rubber over old tin cans. He enjoyed the rhythms of *adakem*, *tetia*, *gome*, and *konkonna*, heard in the popular music played by the village

¹ A more lengthy treatment of Koo Nimo's life and music is presented in the author's doctoral dissertation (Kaye 1992), and in a book currently in preparation.

² The Akan, including the Asante, Fante, Brong, Baoule, and others, form one of the predominant populations of modern Ghana and Ivory Coast. Asante-Twi is one of the main dialects of the Akan peoples, and this was the predominant language spoken in Ofoase. “Ashanti” is the British spelling of Asante, and it is still used to designate the province in central Ghana. On the Akan, cf. Fynn 1982.

³ This is still practiced by children in Ghana, but apparently less commonly than in the past (Nketia 1963:4).

He loved listening to the telling of Ananse-the-spider tales (*Anansesem*) by village elders, which were interspersed with story songs (*mmoguo*) that he would commit to memory.⁴ sang traditional Akan dirges.

More than thirty years of British rule and other influences arising from the region's long history of foreign trade had resulted, especially since the late 19th century, in the introduction of new musical instruments and styles, and the development of new musical genres in the Ghanaian regions. At the age of six, Kwabena was given lessons on the harmonium, and he soon played it to accompany hymn singing at Sunday church services. He was taught English at the local school, and learned English-language school songs. Further exposure to Western instruments came from his older brother Paul, who played the harmonica and Nana Kwabena Tenten, another villager, who performed popular *asiko* songs to his own accompaniment on the accordion, with rhythm provided by a carpenter's saw.⁵ The Ofoase brass band, in which his father played trumpet, had a repertoire of popular highlife tunes and British airs.

In 1942, Kwabena's older sister married a member of the Asante royal family and went to live in Kumasi.⁶ In that year, Kwabena also moved to Kumasi where, by living in the bosom of Asante royalty, he came to appreciate diverse courtly musical genres. He recalls the "impressive atmosphere and environment of the palace, the paraphernalia of the Asantehene in state": "All the chiefs came to take their position, and everyone knew their proper position – the chiefs, the drummers, the musketeers, the horn players, the bearers of the towering umbrellas. It was a great display of organization and discipline."⁷

Kwabena was fascinated with the court linguists and their language (*ahenfie kasa*), rich in euphemisms and proverbs. He attuned himself to the language of the court drums and ivory horns (*ntahera*) that rang out appellations to the Asante king (*Asantehene*). He was also impressed by the inspirational songs of the court minstrels (*kwadwomfoo*), laden with proverbs, history, and praise for the Asantehene and Queen Mother.⁸ He later described his upbringing in the Manhyia by saying, "I was irradiated with tradition."

Kwabena was sent to the Kumasi Presbyterian Middle School where the Western-style education included further training in English language and study of Western music. He studied the organ, learned musical notation, and was introduced to the

⁴ According to Nketia, this entertainment has lost popularity in Ghana as a result of rapid social change (Nketia 1972:172).

⁵ Kofi Kese (b. 1919), an Ofoase villager who played euphonium in the village brass band in the 1930s, and Paul Amponsah kindly shared their memories with me during my visit to Ofoase in December 1988. On *asiko* in the Akan regions, cf. Nketia 1972:173-4.

⁶ The Amponsah family claims a lineage from the 18th century Denkyira king, Boa Amponsem. Denkyira, an Akan state to the south of Ashanti, was defeated and incorporated by the latter.

⁷ Koo Nimo, interview by author, 23 May 1989.

⁸ On the *kwadwom* songs, Nketia writes, "...its primary function was to reinforce a ruler's sense of tradition by reminding him of the heroic ideals of the state and the past exploits of his predecessors..." (Nketia 1987:201).

music of composers such as Bach and Beethoven. At the same time, through access to his brother-in-law's gramophone player, he delved into a variety of popular musical styles coming out of Britain, the United States, and the Caribbean, including Cuban musicians, the Sexteto Habanero and Don Azpiazu, and recordings by Bing Crosby, the Andrews Sisters, Glenn Miller, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington from the USA.

In 1948, he was sent to Adisadel College, a prestigious boarding school in Cape Coast, where he spent four years receiving a British-style education. Here he sang in the church choir and played Protestant hymns and selections from Bach and Mendelssohn on the organ at Sunday church services. He took piano lessons and practiced music from the repertory of Western classical and popular music. He also played keyboards in the student highlife dance band. He was fond of swing and jazz, and dreamed of becoming a jazz pianist. Soon, however, his musical interests turned to the guitar, which was a popular instrument among the students at Adisadel, and also well-liked in the coastal Fante region around Cape Coast.

The guitar was becoming a musical instrument of importance in Ghana, and in sub-Saharan Africa generally in the first half of the 20th century (cf. Kaye 1998). In the period between the 1920s and 1940s, in both rural and urban styles, an increasing number of recordings by Akan musicians were featuring the guitar as the main accompaniment instrument to singing, alongside the percussion. One of the rural idioms was the *odonsan*, which derived from traditions of *seperewa* (harp-lute) playing. The urban guitar bands of the 1940s and 1950s also played *odonsan*, but they were coming to concentrate increasingly on highlife and related popular styles.

Kwabena Amponsah bought his first guitar, a Gallotone from South Africa, on a school vacation in Kumasi. He soon began to study local guitar styles with friends and local guitarists in Cape Coast. During visits to Kumasi, he would spend hours at the gramophone stands at Kejetia lorry park, where he could listen to recordings of guitar-accompanied Akan songs by the Kumasi Trio, Akwasi Manu, Sam, Kwamin, and Ofori Pening. "This was my real academy", Koo Nimo has said of Kejetia, "I listened to every musician at that time."⁹

One of the first guitar patterns he learned was called "caterpillar walking", which is actually a form of *dagomba*, one of the popular coastal West African guitar idioms, known from Sierra Leone to Nigeria. (Ex. 1)¹⁰ The *dagomba* style is performed on a single six-stringed guitar, tuned in the common manner (E-A-d-g-b-e'). Its harmonies are usually based on a seven tone diatonic scale in a Western 'major' key such as F, G, E, or C, and emphasize two chords, the tonic major (I), and the dominant seventh (V7). The meter is 4/4, with a relatively fast tempo, in the range of 116 - 136 beats per minute. The melody consists of a 4-beat cyclical pattern that

⁹ Koo Nimo, interview by the author, 28 December 1988. Kejetia, like any transportation terminal at the present, was a convenient location for selling music. In 1989, music (cassette tape) stands still dotted Kejetia lorry park.

¹⁰ Collins suggests that the *dagomba* originated with Liberian sailors (Collins 1985:1-2). In its emphasis on major-key harmonies, and its moderately-fast 4/4 meter, *dagomba* is very similar to highlife.

traces an alternation between the tonic and dominant chords.

Ex. 1. Caterpillar walking for one guitar. Upper staff: forefinger; lower staff: thumb.
Quarter note (crotchet) = 124

Much of the subtlety of this style derives from the rhythmic and melodic variations that emerge from the intricate right-hand thumb and forefinger plucking style. The thumb articulates the lower notes on the beat and on the eighth-note off-beats, while the forefinger articulates the upper part, often on the sixteenth notes falling in-between the articulations of the lower notes. This interlocking style, which Gerhard Kubik has referred to as likely to give rise to “inherent rhythms” recalls similar techniques used in a number of African instrumental traditions (Kubik 1964:48; Berliner 1978:88). The thumb-and-forefinger plucking style seems to be common in African acoustic guitar playing, as well as in several indigenous African harp traditions (cf. Kubik 1962:33; Chemillier and Dampierre 1996:6).

Upon graduating from Adisadel in 1952, Kwabena returned to Ofoase to serve as a student teacher for the Social Welfare Department (Mass Education). He taught science and mathematics, played soccer, and helped direct the village brass band. He taught the musicians to read sol-fa notation, and, and directed them in performances of highlife songs, calypsos, waltzes, American and English popular songs, and Negro Spirituals.¹¹ While in Ofoase, he also kept a journal, in which he took notes on Asante-Twi proverbs, stories, and song lyrics, which he collected in conversations with village musicians and elders.

In 1954, Kwabena moved to Accra to pursue studies in medical technology at the Medical Research Institute. In the evenings he liked to go to E. T. Mensah’s pharmacy at London Market, where he could watch the rehearsals of the Tempos Band, one of the country’s leading dance orchestras. At these rehearsals, he met Isaac Evans Maison (I. E.), who led a popular guitar band called I. E.’s Band. Soon I. E. invited him to join his group as a rhythm (supporting) guitarist.¹² Kwabena became

¹¹ Kwaku Dua, interview by author, 28 December 1988. Born in Ofoase in 1936, at the time of the interview, Dua was a sergeant in the Ghanaian Army, and resided in Accra. He was a member of the Ofoase village brass band in the time period under discussion.

¹² The ‘guitar bands’ also referred to in Ghana as ‘string bands’ represent an outgrowth of the earlier West African guitar-based ensembles such as the Kumasi Trio. Alongside the guitar bands, the ‘dance bands’ (such as E. T. Mensah’s Tempos Band) played similar highlife-based repertoires, but they also emulated the Western jazz or big

a valued group member. I. E. recalled that he was “a welfare man, a diplomat who helped me deal with the musicians who would not show up for practice.”¹³

I. E.’s Band had a typical instrumentation of lead male vocalist and a two-man chorus, two guitars, and Afro-Latin style percussion, including conga drums, bongos, maracas and bell. An additional feature was the clarinet, played by I. E. himself. The band specialized in highlife, which had become the main popular musical idiom in urbanizing southern Ghana by this period.¹⁴ The group played the normal professional circuit of dances, life-cycle events of the urban community, and concert parties, a music-theater form known in Ghana since the early part of the 20th century (cf. Collins 1976; Bame 1985). Kwabena made four recordings with I.E.’s Band for the Accra-based Queenophone label. The songs are all in the guitar band highlife idiom of the period, structured around diatonic major harmonies and a 4/4 meter with a syncopated claves-type pattern played by the percussion. In the recording of “Go Inside”, an amusing song about a struggle between a civilian and an arresting police officer, Kwabena can be heard plucking a *dagomba*-type accompaniment pattern.

In 1955, Kwabena returned to Kumasi to take a job with the Ministry of Health at the General Hospital. He joined a musical group similar to I. E.’s, called Antobre’s Band. The following year, he was recruited by the Ghana Broadcasting Company to join a trio formed for the new ‘Variety Entertainment in Akan’ radio series. It was called the ‘Koo Nimo Entertainment Trio’ after the stage name of Kwabena’s uncle, Adjekum T.D.B. Literally connoting ‘Kofi, who takes the blame [for what he has not done]’, “Koo Nimo” is an Asante sobriquet with ironic and rustic overtones.¹⁵ The name well-matched the mix of guitar band music, highlife, folk songs, and comedy which the group performed. The group consisted of three male singers (tenor, alto, and baritone) with two guitars and a tapped bottle. Kwabena sang, played the guitar, and traded comic banter with his uncle. He also composed several original songs for the group, in styles such as *odonson* and highlife.

When his uncle left the group in 1957, Daniel Kwabena Amponsah decided to adopt the name ‘Koo Nimo’ for himself. Over the next several years, Kwabena — now Koo Nimo — continued to perform on the radio and at clubs and special events with his trio. Music was still a secondary occupation, however. During the day, Koo Nimo — as Kwabena Amponsah — worked as a medical technician in the Kumasi General Hospital and, from 1960, in the biochemistry lab at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. He also married in this period and started to build a family.

band ensembles and featured instruments such as trumpets, trombones, saxophones, guitars, Afro-Latin percussion and the American-style jazz drum set.

¹³ I. E. Maison, interview by author, 17 August 1987.

¹⁴ According to Ghanaian musicologist Asante Darkwa, I. E.’s Band was among those popular music groups which “standardized Highlife” in the post-war period (Darkwa 1974:141).

¹⁵ Cf. Koo Nimo, interview by John Collins, 1 August 1973 (Collins 1985:95-96). The name ‘Koo Nimo’ is comparable to a name such as ‘Ol’ Joe Clark’ which might be used by a banjo player/story-teller on an ‘old-time’ country music radio program in the USA.

A decisive turn for Koo Nimo came in 1962, when he won a scholarship to study biochemistry abroad at Paddington Technical College in London. During his three years in London, Koo Nimo took advantage of the musical opportunities the city afforded. He enrolled in the Len Williams School and studied classical guitar under Janet Buckenham and Stella MacKenzie. Under these teachers he practiced fingerpicking techniques using the thumb and the first three fingers of the right hand, and a variety of techniques to exploit the timbral possibilities of the acoustic guitar.

Also during this period, he developed a musical friendship with Steve Addo, a junior friend from Kumasi. With Koo Nimo on lead vocals and the guitar, and Steve on supporting vocals and tapped metal bell or castanets (*dawuro* or *firikyiwa*), they frequently entertained at parties in London's Ghanaian community. Koo Nimo and Steve were jazz fans, and together they attended jazz and blues concerts at the Hammersmith Odeon and the Astoria Theatre. Some of the performers they saw included Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Memphis Slim, Sonny Boy Williamson, and Muddy Waters. When the Duke Ellington Orchestra came to London, Koo Nimo made his way backstage and talked with the musicians. He was impressed by the tight organization of American jazz orchestras, and by the admiration and respect they won from enthusiastic London audiences. These experiences helped solidify Koo Nimo's resolve to make his own mark as a musician and bandleader.

Koo Nimo returned to Ghana in 1965 and resumed his work in the biochemistry department of UST. He was also determined to establish himself on the Ghanaian music scene. He formed a new musical trio with Kwao Sarfo and J. K. Barwuah called Koo Nimo and the Kumasi Adadam Group. The name *Adadam* in the group's title, meaning 'roots' or 'old stuff', referenced the group's 'old-fashioned' and rural orientation. In the 1960s many of the popular guitar bands in Ghana, such as Kakaiku's Band, K. Gyasi's Band, and Onyina's Band, typically used electric guitars and sometimes included an electric organ as well. Male vocals in an indigenous style, the use of acoustic rather than electric guitar, and indigenous percussion such as the *dawuro* metal bell and *prempresiwa* bass lamellophone, marked Koo Nimo's music as different from most modern urban guitar bands. The group normally performed wearing indigenous cloth (*ntoma*) rather than Western attire, which further emphasized the group's affiliations with traditional Akan musical culture. On the other hand, Koo Nimo was also able to tell certain sophisticated stories, jokes, and aphorisms, in both Twi and English, which helped him appeal to the urbane and university-educated audiences he frequently performed before in Ghana.

In 1966, the group made ten recordings, produced by Kwame Gyasi, a prominent Kumasi musician and bandleader. The recordings and pressings were done at the facilities of Ghana Films (GFIC) in Accra.¹⁶ In addition to the Adadam Group, Gyasi and members of his band provided some musical support. Five 45-rpm singles were issued from these recordings in 1967. They include eight original songs by Koo

¹⁶ Interview with K. Gyasi at his home in Kumasi, 27 August 1987.

Nimo, and two traditional songs. These were the first published recordings of Koo Nimo's work as principal composer and performer, and they are illustrative of the mature musical synthesis he had achieved by this period.

Before we look at an individual song in detail, it will be useful to describe Koo Nimo's style in general, focussing on the 1966 recordings, which were scored for lead vocals and chorus, steel-strung acoustic guitars, *prempresiwa* (bass lamellophone with three metal lamellae), and two tapped idiophones (bottle tapped with a coin, and a wood block), with the occasional addition of other percussion. The harmonic settings of Koo Nimo's songs mingle Western and indigenous Akan elements. Most of his songs, like the majority of Ghanaian highlife songs in general, are set in the Western major mode (for example, from the 1966 recordings, "*Owuo ton ade a to bi*", "*Obi aware sem*", "*Owusu se mamma*", and "*Aburokyiri Abrabo*"), with the frequent use of the flatted seventh scale degree, in the melody, and in the dominant seventh of the sub-dominant — V7 of IV chord.

Koo Nimo also uses heptatonic modes derived from indigenous Akan practice, similar to the medieval Western diatonic modes. The most common are the Phrygian (diatonic mode beginning on E, as in "*Nana Yaa Asantewaa*") and Mixolydian (diatonic mode beginning on G, as in "*Qdonson*"). In each case, simultaneous harmonies are typically built up by thirds, a practice common to both traditional Akan music and Western music. In the major mode, the most common chords are the tonic (I), the sub-dominant (IV), the dominant seventh (V7), and the dominant seventh of the sub-dominant (V7/IV or I7). In the Phrygian-type mode, the common chords are the tonic minor (i), the super-tonic (II), and the sub-tonic (vii or vii7). In the Mixolydian-type mode, the common chords are the tonic seventh (I7), the supertonic (ii or ii7), and the subdominant (IV).

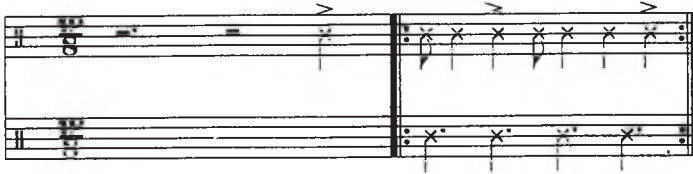
A note on the vocal harmonies in Koo Nimo's music needs to be added here. Akan traditional music uses heptatonic, diatonic scales similar to Western diatonic scales, but with subtle differences in the fine-tuning of the scale degrees. Nketia has stated that the Akan heptatonic scales and their intervals "are near enough to just intonation to make the use of the staff adequate for practical purpose."¹⁷ The vocal parts in live and recorded performances of Koo Nimo's music are generally sung according to local Akan rules of fine-tuning, whereas the guitar's harmonies follow traditional Western intonation. This disjunction between the harmonic inflections of the voice and those of the accompanying instruments is not unusual, and can be noted as well in American country music and the blues. The subtle differences between the Akan vocal harmonies and the harmonies of the guitar, however, lend a characteristically local flavor to Koo Nimo's music.

There are two principal rhythmic-metric structures in Koo Nimo's song

¹⁷ Nketia 1973:3. Cf. Agawu 1990:224 on the similar scale system used among the northern Ewe, a Kwa-speaking people who live adjacent to the Akan. On similar scale systems among the Yoruba and other forest-region cultures in West Africa, cf. Kubik 1989:142.

repertoire: the mid-to-fast tempo 4/4 structure (110 to 130 beats per minute is a typical range), most common meter in Ghanaian highlife music; and the somewhat more complex mid-to-fast tempo 12/8 meter, which uses an asymmetrical rhythmic cycle (also referred to by some authors as ‘time-lines’ or ‘bell patterns’) well-known in many traditional African rhythmic idioms (Ex. 2).¹⁸

I call this cycle ‘asymmetrical’ because it consists of two phrases, one 5-pulses long, and the second 7-pulses long. The first phrase begins prior to the ‘downbeat’, on the 11th pulse. There is indeed the sense of a downbeat for Koo Nimo, and there is also an underlying ‘regulative beat’ of 4 dotted quarter notes per measure (cf. Anku 1988). The transcription in Ex. 2 shows the 12-pulse bell-pattern on the upper staff, and the underlying regulative beat on the lower staff. Rhythm is a driving force in Koo Nimo’s music, and the complex interplay of syncopations and rhythmic variations in the guitar and vocal parts, and the various percussion parts, account for a great deal of his music’s interest.



Ex.2. 12-pulse rhythmic cycle. Dotted quarter (crotchet) = 136

Koo Nimo’s melodic procedures and overall structure takes a verse-and-refrain form, which could also be labeled as ‘strophic variation’ since his verse melodies are non-repeating, and his verses and refrains are typically sung over stable, cyclic one or two measure harmonic-melodic patterns played on the guitar. All highlife songs are built according to this model, and use a foundational two-measure (eight beats in 4/4 meter) cyclical pattern often referred to by musicians as *yamponsah*.¹⁹ Koo Nimo’s “*Aburokyiri abrabo*” (1966), a highlife, features this familiar pattern (Ex. 3). Koo Nimo has a repertory of about ten basic guitar patterns for the *odqonson* idiom. Ex. 4 shows one such pattern from his song “*Qdqonson*” (1966); Ex. 5 shows the pattern from “*Okomfo Anokye*” (1969). The transcriptions include the rhythmic ostinato that would be played on a tapped idiophone such as the *dawuro* metal bell.

¹⁸ A number of scholars have discussed the fascinating issue of African rhythmic cycles, particularly those with 12-pulse cycles. For interesting treatments, cf. Dauer 1988 and Anku 1988.

¹⁹ The pattern is named after the song *Yaa Amponsah*, a song popular in Ghana since the 1920s, and first recorded by the Kumasi Trio in 1928. The 8-beat guitar pattern, which is as omnipresent in highlife as the 12-bar structure is in the blues, is based on the tune of this popular song. The song is believed by many in Ghana to have been composed by the Fanti guitarist Sam, sometime in the 1920s (cf. Collins 1989:223). This melody, as Waterman has suggested, has been widely circulated in West Africa (Waterman 1990:49). Most recently, it was used as a basis for the song “Spirit voices” by Paul Simon, which appears on the compact disc *The rhythm of the saints* (Warner Brothers, 1990). There, Camerounian musician Vincent Nguini is credited with the guitar arrangements, “based on a traditional Ghanaian song ‘Yaa Amponsah’ by Jacob Sam.”

Ex. 3. Yamponsah (highlife) guitar pattern. Quarter (crotchet) = 120

Ex. 4. Odonson guitar pattern from Odonson (1966). Dotted quarter (crotchet) = 160

Ex. 5. Odonson guitar pattern from Okomfo Anokye (1969). Dotted quarter (crotchet) = 152

Let us now look at the 1966 recording of “*Owuo ton ade a to bi*” as exemplary of the salient structural features of Koo Nimo’s music in general. Koo Nimo originally composed this song in the late 1950s. The song is scored for lead vocals and chorus, steel-strung acoustic guitar, *prempresiwa*, bottle tapped with a coin, and wood block. There is a balance in the overall texture between the guitar part, percussion, *prempresiwa*, and vocals. The first sounds one hears in the recording are those of the guitar, which plays a two-measure cyclic pattern Koo Nimo identifies as *atene odonson*. The guitar maintains this pattern throughout the entire piece, with only slight variation (Ex. 6). A capo has been placed on the second fret, so that the left hand fingering pattern is played as if in the key of C, whereas the actual key is D major. The guitar pattern consists of the tonic (D) alternated with the dominant seventh (A7). The most prominent tones in the guitar part are the alternating f#’ and g’ on the first (highest) string, and the ‘a’ below middle c’, which rings like a drone

throughout the entire measure (this note is common to both the D and A7 chords).

The percussion instruments are introduced in the second measure, where they immediately begin to provide complex rhythmic figures within the context of a 4/4 meter at a lively pace of 116 beats per minute. The tapped idiophones provide an ostinato figure identical to that used in much of Ghanaian highlife (Ex. 6). The *prempresiwa*, playing both on the lamellae and with hand claps on the wooden body of the instrument, performs a syncopated figure similar to the Cuban *claves* pattern, also common in highlife (Ex. 6). In the course of the piece, the *prempresiwa* player provides intricate rhythmic and melodic variations.

The musical score for Ex. 6 consists of five staves. The top staff is for the guitar forefinger, showing a melodic line in G major with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The second staff is for the guitar thumb, showing a rhythmic accompaniment with chord symbols: I, V7, I, V7, I, V7, I, V7. The third staff is for the woodblock, showing a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The fourth staff is for the tapped bottle, showing a similar rhythmic pattern. The bottom staff is for the *Prempresiwa*, showing a syncopated rhythmic pattern. The score is divided into four measures, with repeat signs at the beginning and end of each measure.

Ex. 6. Atene odonson pattern, owuo ton ade a to bi (1966). Quarter (crotchet) = 116

After six measures of introduction by the guitars and percussion, we hear Koo Nimo's expressive tenor-baritone. He maintains a soft-to-moderate dynamic level in his singing, as well as a quality of seriousness. For most of the melody, Koo Nimo sings in a comfortable mid-range between $f\#$ and c' (middle c). When he ventures into a higher range (up to e'), he adds intensity to his singing. Two male singers, in the tenor and baritone ranges, add their voices during the refrains, which always end with a held humming sound (hmm). The vocalists sing using Akan intonation, and simultaneous harmonies built on thirds and fifths in the choral refrain.

The sung verse is a succession of diverse melodic phrases, often built by the techniques of variation and sequencing. The length of each verse varies; nonetheless, the verses do have an overall melodic structure. In the first verse, for example, the first few melodic phrases dwell on the fifth scale degree (a). In the subsequent measures, the cadence points of each phrase descend step by step, from g to $f\#$ to e before returning to ' a ', and finally descending to the tonic (d). Each melody is carefully fitted to a line of text, and each text line is often separated by several beats

of thoughtful silence in the vocal part. The refrain has a compact two-measure structure that parallels the two-measure guitar ostinato. As in the Cuban montuno and other sub-Saharan African call-and-response vocal idioms, Koo Nimo interpolates sung phrases of text that overlap with the two-measure refrain sung by the chorus. The chorus motif is repeated three times, before ending on the tonic major chord.

The musical structure of this song is also a cradle for a meaningful sung text. According to Koo Nimo, his Asante audience is interested above all in "...the wisdom, the depth of your language, the way you address them."²⁰ The majority of Koo Nimo's songs are composed and sung in Asante-Twi. The particular kind of language Koo Nimo uses, and the particular kinds of themes he emphasizes, are associated with older, traditional musical and lyrical idioms of the Akan, and often refer to traditional village life. This is not unusual for Akan songs of his generation, especially those directed at rural audiences. Writing on the song texts in guitar-band highlife music of the 1960s and 1970s, Owusu Brempong states that composers "take folktales, traditional songs of rural people" as well as "funeral songs...and other folk songs" as raw material for use in their own songs (Brempong 1984:94). In his lyrics, Koo Nimo shows special interest for rarified Akan poetic terminology, difficult metaphors and epithets, and other references often associated with Asante courtly traditions.

"*Owuo ton ade a to bi*" is a meditation on the problem and figure of Death, a theme not uncommon in Asante musical traditions (cf. Nketia 1969; van der Geest 1980). Koo Nimo translates the aphoristic title into English as "Buy when Death sells". Death, personified as 'Father Death' (*Agya wuo*), introduced in the first lines of text, is the figure of the Almighty: *Agya wuo nie / Odomankoma wuo nie* (Father Death is here / The Creator of Death is here). This references an Asante proverb, "*Odomankoma a oboo owuo owuo kum no*" (The Creator made Death, and Death killed him). The next line elaborates on the idea of Death's omnipresence: '*Kontonkurowi a oda amansan kon mu nie*'. Here, Death is associated with 'The halo of the moon' (*Kontonkurowi*) which 'encircles all mankind'. The next lines introduce folk medicine, and help further situate the poetic world of the song in a traditional village past: '*Mpanimfoq se dua kontonkyi / dua ma aduro*' (The old men say that the Kontonkyi [a local tree, with deep entangled roots] provides us with healing substances). The following lines further draw linkages between death and the struggle for life in a village setting. The chorus's refrain consists of the onomatopoetic syllables, '*buo buo buoo, hmm*' which suggest feelings of sadness and sympathy (What a pity, hmm...).

Other songs by Koo Nimo address problems of marriage and family in village contexts, such as "*Odonson*" (Let love prevail), "*Obi aware sem*" (When friends interfere in marriage), and "*Asew aye me bone*" (Father-in-law offends) from the

²⁰ Koo Nimo, interview by author, 25 March 1989.

1966 recordings. "*Agyanka ye mmq̄bo*" (The orphan needs sympathy) (1966) takes on a recurrent theme in Asante song, the desperate situation of the orphan; "*Qdq̄ nua*" (My lover) (1966) is a love song. "*Owusu se mamma*" (The driver's lament) (1966) tells the story of a dispute between neighbors; "*Aburokyiri abrabo*" (Overseas life) (1966) confronts the problem of Africans abroad and their struggles to find their way in the modern world. The two traditional songs from the 1966 recordings treat themes of religious faith, in the form of the *abibidwom*, "*Fiade mo ne ko Iesu*" (Fight on, Good Friday Christ), and Asante history and African national pride, in "*Nana Yaa Asantewaa*" (*Kokrohinko*), a homage to the Queen Mother of Ejisu, who led battles against the British at the turn of the 20th century.

Subsequent to the 1966 recordings, Koo Nimo continued to balance his occupations as musician, biochemistry technologist, husband and father. In 1968 he adopted Kwadwo Noah Owusu, an eight-year old boy who demonstrated remarkable abilities as a drummer. Over the following years, Koo Nimo devoted much time to helping Noah cultivate the traditional art of the *atumpan* master drummer. He expanded his group, now called the *Adadam Agofomma* (Roots Ensemble), which performed traditional Ghanaian 'drumming and dancing' genres, particularly the Akan idioms of *adowa* and *kete*, the latter a dance associated with the Asante court. Koo Nimo, playing the *dundun* hourglass-shaped pressure drum, led this group in performances at middle schools, high schools, colleges, and at traditional occasions such as outdoorings and funerals.

At the same time, Koo Nimo composed new songs and recorded them with his guitar band. In 1969 he recorded two of his most celebrated compositions. "*Okomfo Anqkye*", an *qdq̄nson*, is a tribute to the traditional priest Anqkye, who in Asante tradition helped king Osei Tutu found the Asante nation (on Anqkye, cf. McCaskie 1986). "*Abena mesuro gyam fite*", also an *qdq̄nson*, tells a story of adultery and murder, which may be interpreted as metaphor for instability and betrayal in other realms, including the political. "*Ohia Ye Ya*", from 1973, addresses the problems of sickness and poverty that plague common people everywhere, and inordinately in Africa.

In 1976, Koo Nimo produced his first long-playing record, entitled "*Agya Koo Nimo*". This album contains eight songs, four recorded for the first time: "*Nana Otuo Acheampong*", a eulogy for the late Kumawuhene (a regional Asante chief); "*Naa Densua*", a highlife with a witty portrayal of marital problems; "*Akora dua kube*" (The old man plants coconuts), a complex song which incorporates aspects of the *mmoguo* (traditional story-song) and which lauds the values of respect for elders, hard work, community solidarity, and patriotism; and "*Onipa behwe yie*" (Forewarned is forearmed), which develops a theme also seen written on Ghanaian lorries or storefronts, 'Beware of friends'.²¹

Koo Nimo's recorded output between 1966 and 1976 reveals a consistent style,

²¹ *Agya* is an Akan term of respect, and literally means 'father'.

but also certain refinements within his individual aesthetic. Beginning with his 1969 recordings, Koo Nimo eschewed the steel-strung guitar sound of his 1966 recordings and has generally opted for the mellower sound of a nylon-strung guitar. On the 1976 album, he introduced influences from ‘classic guitar’, jazz, and Spanish/Latin guitar style; for example, in the sparkling and harmonically intricate guitar introduction to “*Aburokyiri Abrabo*” (1976), and in the meditative solo-guitar introduction to the *abibidwom*, “*Fiade mo ne ko*” (1976), illustrative of the kinds of extended harmonies one finds in Koo Nimo’s music. The way he takes us from the diminished seventh chord to a cadential formula on the tonic (#i dim7-ii7-I6/4-V7-I), reflects aspects of highlife style, with its influences from ragtime, jazz, and Protestant hymns.

Koo Nimo’s blend of traditional proverbs, *qdonson*, highlife, and a variety of embellishments borrowed from classical music and jazz, reflects his genuine interest in musical innovation. In a 1973 interview with John Collins, Koo Nimo explained, “I don’t try to play pure traditional music as I like to move with the times and be experimental... for stagnant waters breed mosquitoes and this applies to music. I feel we should move but be guided by what we have, and feed this, like rivulets feed a stream.” He told Collins that he hoped to use a variety of musical influences to “enrich the harmony” of highlife guitar and develop an “Afro-Jazz” (Collins 1985:98-100).

Nonetheless, Koo Nimo essentially has been viewed by the public and his admirers in the press as a musician who excels in conserving traditional musical idioms. A brief ‘disc review’ of his song “*Okomfo Anokye*” printed in the *Daily Graphic* reported, “That Koo Nimo is still around is a good thing for traditional music in Ghana. The lyrics tell the story of Ghana’s greatest fetish priest of all time whose name is the title.”²² In his 1974 doctoral dissertation, Asante Darkwa included ‘Koo Nimo’s’ among the six guitar bands he names, of an estimated seventy active in Ghana at the time, and also refers to him as a “traditional” guitar player (1974:140-2). In an article entitled *Ko Nimo – The Sage* published in the Accra-based *Weekly Spectator*, Kwesi Woode opined that “Ko Nimo’s music stands out in the main stream of Ghanaian contemporary folk music. He is the one musician who has been able to ‘follow’ the tradition of Kwasi Manu – whose music was truly symbolic of the traditional Akan music as played in olden times by our forefathers – and kept it up to modern taste without being influenced perceptibly by Western music.”²³

Koo Nimo made his first foreign tour in 1976, when he led a group of musicians representing Ghana in an American tour sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution, on the occasion of the US Bicentennial. On this tour, he met several important African-American musicians, including jazz pianist Randy Weston. In an interview, Koo Nimo affirmed his interest in the relationships between musical styles of the diaspora:

²² ‘Disc review’, *Daily Graphic* (Accra, Ghana), 11 November 1972, p. 10.

²³ Kwesi Woode, “Koo Nimo — The sage”, *Weekly Spectator* (Accra), 18 June 1977.

Nimo says the folk artists are a symbol of his country's efforts in recent years to preserve the native culture and bring knowledge of that culture to Ghana's young people. He says he hopes the American tour brings awareness, particularly to black Americans, of their roots and culture and of the similarities which still exist today. He points out the link between African music and rhythm and American jazz, or even the Bossa Nova beat.²⁴

In January 1978, Koo Nimo was one of two Ghanaian musicians honored for their "tremendous impact on the nation's art and culture over the years", in the first awards ceremony of the recently formed Entertainment Critics and Reviewers Association of Ghana (ECRAG).²⁵ In an article about the awards which appeared in the *Ghanaian Times*, Koo Nimo was heralded as "the very embodiment of Ashanti culture". The writer viewed Koo Nimo primarily as a representative of past traditions, rather than as a modernizer: "Koo Nimo shows no traces of Western influence in his music although he learned it there in Western Europe – Britain, to be specific."²⁶ The article also stressed his importance as a cultural ambassador, at home and abroad: "His influence in the folk traditional music field is immense. On radio, his songs are almost everyday heard. To students at the educational institutions, among the youth in general to whom his appeal is mainly directed and to foreigners, he is a force of unrivalled influence."²⁷

In 1979, Koo Nimo was elected president of MUSIGA, the Musicians' Union of Ghana. In the first year and a half under Koo Nimo's leadership, union membership expanded and, according to an article in *West Africa*, became more broad-based, representing "no longer only...the old professional dance-bands, but also pop-bands, guitar-bands and cultural groups."²⁸ Koo Nimo was elected to a second term in 1982. In that year, he joined forces with the 'fusion' band Edikanfo, and published a cassette tape entitled "*Ghana Osei Yie (Hail, Ghana)*". The title song, composed in a popular style, mixing elements of highlife and funk, became a well-known patriotic anthem. This was one of a few attempts by Koo Nimo to appeal to a wider audience by using popular styles.

In 1984, Koo Nimo had another opportunity to introduce himself and his music to foreign audiences. In cooperation with the Ghanaian Secretary for Culture and Tourism, he put together a multi-ethnic troupe that was to represent the richness and diversity of traditional musical styles in Ghana at the Commonwealth Institute's 'African Music Village' in London. His performances won him extremely positive notice in the London-based African press and other media. In an article entitled "Koo Nimo: The repository of Asante music and culture", Ghanaian critic Kwabena Fosu-Mensah called him "the pillar of Ghana's music today", and "a man whose

²⁴ Rich Davis, "Folk group offers Ghana live", *Evansville Courier* (Evansville, Indiana, USA), 16 July 1976.

²⁵ "ECRAG 1977 Awards, Special Honours", *Ghanaian Times* (Accra), 28 January 1978. The other musician was Nana P. S. K. Ampadu, leader of the African Brothers International band.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ John Collins, "Civilian rule and Ghanas music," *West Africa* (London), 13 April 1981, p. 805.

knowledge, expertise and contribution have lifted his personality and image into a national institution".²⁹

Koo Nimo was featured in several films in the 1980s. He and his group appear in the documentary *Africa come back: the popular music of West Africa* (1984), which aired on British television's Channel Four in 1985. The Ghanaian television documentary *Stars of Yesteryear: Koo Nimo* (1985) also helped spread Koo Nimo's reputation to other African countries, as it was distributed for television broadcast by URTNA, a union of African radio and television corporations.³⁰ Radio programs on Koo Nimo broadcast on the Africa Services of the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corporation, have also helped spread his reputation within Africa.³¹ In 1988, Koo Nimo participated in *Crossing Over*, a documentary film shot in Ghana and Trinidad and Tobago. The film follows Trinidadian musician Lancelot Layne in a trip to Ghana, where he explores African-Caribbean cultural affinities, with Koo Nimo as a guide. The second part of the film follows Koo Nimo's reciprocal visit to Trinidad, where he meets and jams with local musicians representing some of the diverse cultural elements of the island. Koo Nimo and steel pan musician Len 'Boogsie' Sharpe perform a duet on the theme of "Yaa Amponsah", the popular Ghanaian tune which is practically synonymous with highlife.

In July 1988, Koo Nimo made a second successful tour of the US, which included his New York City debut before a capacity audience at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall. This was a prestigious engagement for Koo Nimo, and helped win him further exposure in the press, including a front-page feature in the Weekend section of the *New York Times*, in which he was described as "one of Ghana's premier palmwine guitarists".³² In a feature in *West Africa* entitled "Konimo on Broadway", Ronnie Graham conjectured that "Konimo and his talented band are on the verge of widespread international recognition."³³ During his visit to New York, Koo Nimo prepared two new cassettes, "King of up-up-up" (1988) and "Ko-Nimo

²⁹ Kwabena Fosu-Mensah, "Ko Nimo: The repository of Asante music and culture", *Black Music* (London), April 1985(?), p. 52.

³⁰ In my own travels in Africa, in Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia, I personally met individuals who knew of Koo Nimo through this program. A Liberian friend in New York told me he had seen the program many times on television. The reaction of Moses Matovu, leader of the Afrigo Band in Kampala, was typical of those I have interviewed: "I first thought, oh, this is just another old man from the bush, but when I heard him introduce himself I was shocked by his impeccable English. I was very impressed by how he explained himself and by what he played" (Moses Matovu, interview by author, Kampala, 14 February 1989).

³¹ Leo Sarkisian has produced several shows on Koo Nimo for his "Music time in Africa" program on the VOA; the first one aired in late 1985 (Leo Sarkisian, p.c., 2 October 1991). Bitris Gwamna, a broadcaster from Kaduna, Nigeria, has told me that he was familiar with Koo Nimo from BBC broadcasts to Africa (p.c., 28 September 1991).

³² Peter Watrous, "Two guitarists, two continents and two styles", *New York Times*, Friday, 29 July 1988, C1, C19. The generic terms 'palmwine guitar' or 'palmwine music' are sometimes used to refer to West African acoustic guitar styles associated with early highlife, and the general 'guitar band' cluster of styles. I have not dwelled on this term in this article, because it is not a term that Koo Nimo personally used. In fact, he claims to have learned about the term from a Western journalist. On the use of the term *palmwine* in West Africa, cf. Collins 1989 and Waterman 1988.

³³ Ronnie Graham, "Konimo on Broadway", *West Africa*, 22 August 1988, p. 1533.

at Lincoln Center, USA" (1989). In the former cassette — and in his recent concerts — Koo Nimo introduces the use of the *seperewa*, the Akan harp-lute, alongside the guitar on the *odonson* "Which way to the future?". The release of Koo Nimo's recording "*Osabarima*" (a remastering of the 1976 album *Agya Koo Nimo*) in London in 1990 on compact disc, also helped enhance Koo Nimo's international reputation. Sean Barlow, producer of the 'Afropop' radio series for National Public Radio (NPR) and the BBC, selected "*Osabarima*" as one of the ten best African records of 1990.³⁴

In the 1990s, Koo Nimo continues to fulfill his diverse roles as educator, contributor to social causes, musician, and family man. He performs actively in Ghana and abroad. He remains a highly respected figure in Ghana and has received encomiums for his music and his service as representative of Ghana's cultural aspirations. In February 1991, he was bestowed with the prestigious Asanteman award from Otumfuo Opoko Awise II, the late Asantehene. In 1992, he was awarded Doctor of Letters, *Honoris Causa*, by the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. In 1997, he was the recipient of a Grand Medal for lifetime service to Ghana, an award delivered personally by the Ghanaian head-of-state. Koo Nimo is presently serving as visiting artist in the Ethnomusicology program of the University of Washington, Seattle, USA, for the 1998-1999 term.

A note on the transcriptions

In most of the transcriptions of guitar figures, I use traditional Western staff notation (rather than guitar tablature). The higher melodic line, plucked by the forefinger of the right hand appears on the upper staff, and the lower melodic line articulated by the thumb appears on the lower staff. These basic patterns are subject to fascinating variation in the hands of a master guitarist such as Koo Nimo, and the transcriptions are to be understood as skeletal versions. Musical transcriptions are under copyright by Daniel Kwabena Amponsah and the author.

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³⁴ Sean Barlow, "Top ten 'Afropop Worldwide' fave discs," *The Beat* (Los Angeles), vol. 10, no. 1 (1991), p. 18. The producer of the compact disc told the author that many orders for this recording were coming from Japan.

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Measure 7 Phrase 1 Phr. 2 Phr. 3

m. 11 E-gye wuo nie O-do-man-ko-ma wue ni O-

kon-ton-k'ro-wi a o-da-man-san kon mu nie Ye kon-ton-kyi dua m'a-d'ro e-ben O-foa-se'o-

m. 15 wuo ton a-de a to bi Na s'o-b'o a'wo be-ko Saa n'o-w'ee e-na Saa n'o-w'ee o-gya O-

m. 19 Pa-nin n-ti mom-mo 'wuo-din Na'm-be-ka'm-pan-im-fo yea / A-gyace o-baa baa-ko a-gye gye me A-

m. 23 me-shia n-kwan-shia wuo S'a-bran-tie pa-tu wu a / Na o-baa ho w'o'm / Min yaa-nom

Ex. 7. Vocal melody, verse 1, "Owuo ton ade a to bi" (1966). Quarter note (crotchet) = 116

buo buoo hmm

Min yaa-nom, e-we min-y'ee M-fan-ko-ma-ye Kwa-b'ha be-na On-yan-ko-pon

Buo buo buoo hmm Buo buo buoo

nan-so' bu-su-o-foo 'hye-b're buo buoo hmm

hmm Buo buo buoo hmm

Ex. 8. Refrain from "Owuo ton ade a to bi" (1966). Quarter note (crotchet) = 116

Quarter = 110

I (E^b major) V⁷/V V I V⁷/V V

III⁷ VI⁷ II⁷ V⁷ III⁷ VI⁷ II⁷ (v⁷) 3

I #I dim 7 ii⁷ I ⁶/₄ V⁷ I

Ex. 9. Guitar introduction to “Aburokyiri Abrabo” (1976). Quarter note (crotchet) = 110