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## “SINGING THE HEALING”: THE RITUALS OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES CHURCH IN GHANA

By

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**Abstract:** While many in Ghana prefer modern medical systems, others use indigenous means such as those emanating from shrines and indigenous sects. Today, many religious practices in Ghana focus a greater part of their services on healing and the general wellbeing of its members. The formation of African Indigenous Churches (AICs) has played a central role in bridging the gap between indigenous and Christian concepts of worship, healing, and wellbeing. The Twelve Apostles Church, first of the AICs in Ghana, is prominent as far as good health and the wellbeing of its members are concerned. These indigenous musical healing practices are seldom recognised for their significant contribution towards good health and wellbeing. In this article, I use an ethnographic approach, employing interviews and participant observation, to describe the significance of the musical healing rituals of the Twelve Apostles Church in Ghana. The question is, how does drumming, dancing, and singing in the Twelve Apostles Church contribute to good health and wellbeing?

**Keywords:** Healing, wellbeing, rituals, indigenous music, religion, worship, African Indigenous Churches, The Twelve Apostles Church.

### **Introduction**

Although the development of modern medical practices in Ghana is unprecedented and has many benefits, indigenous healing practices continue to thrive. Healthcare issues are addressed by individuals depending on what works best for them. Many indigenous healing practices such as those from the Twelve Apostles Church (TAC), mostly advanced through music, are seldom recognised for their contribution towards good health and wellbeing. According to Friedson, a contributing factor to this problem is that “ethnographers have not given musical experience a corresponding prominent place in their research. Music is usually treated as an epiphenomenon, something that accompanies other, more important ritual activities” (1996: xiii). I define healing in the context of this study and within the context of the TAC as any form of cure, be it physical, mental or psychological. In this paper I describe the significance of the musical healing rituals of the TAC in Ghana. The question is, to what extent does the

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dependency on traditional music in the healing rituals of the TAC shape the idea of an indigenous religion or belief system?

This ethnographic research was conducted with six congregations of the TAC in the Central Region of Ghana. Data was collected through participant observation and interviews among congregations in Anomabu, Brofoyedur, Kormantse, Pedu, Kwaprow and Moree.<sup>1</sup> Between June and July 2014, healing rituals were observed at the Moree and Anomabu Taedo branches of the TAC respectively. Other rituals were witnessed between 2015 and 2017. I conducted the interviews in the Akan dialects, *Twi* and *Fante*.<sup>2</sup> All healing rituals were witnessed on Fridays (the designated day for healing) and interviews were conducted afterward.

### **Akan folk belief, medicine, and missiology**

Before the European missionaries arrived in Ghana towards the end of the fifteenth century, healing practices were primarily through indigenous means. Most illnesses were attributed to bad spirits or witchcraft invoked by an enemy (Nkansah-Kyeremateng 1999, Mendonsa 2002). Consequently, one had to seek protection from a more powerful source to prevent bad spirits and witchcraft from harming one. The *Akan* are the dominant social group in Ghana made up of subgroups such as the *Ashanti* and the *Fante*. The cultural cosmology of the Akan people prominently displays belief systems based on supernatural influences. However, European missionaries branded such belief systems as superstitious even though the Akan had a well-defined system of healing based on folk belief and medicine (Mohr 2009: 437).

The Akan believe in the supreme spirit (Supreme God) and the lesser spirits (lesser gods). Nkansah-Kyeremateng (1999) writes that the Akan believe in the Supreme God but never worship Him. Instead, the supreme spirit (God) is worshipped through the lesser (spirits) gods. These lesser gods were seen in inanimate natural objects such as rivers, trees, and rocks, and served as intermediaries between the Supreme God and man. The issue of worship should be emphasised because it is very important as far as Akan traditional religion is concerned. It is music that connects the supernatural, the gods and the community during worship. The musical performance itself is religious (Agordoh 2010). Agordoh argues that drumming, singing, and dancing charges the atmosphere and helps in the manifestation of the gods and spirits during indigenous worship (2010). Within

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<sup>1</sup> In 2011, I worked on the documentary, “Echoes of the Ancestors” with Caroline Hopkins, a cinematographer from Ireland. This project helped me to observe and document healing rituals of the Pedu and Kwaprow branches of the Twelve Apostles Church in Cape Coast.

<sup>2</sup> *Twi* and *Fante* are two similar languages (dialects of Akan) spoken by the *Ashanti* and *Fante*. *Fante* is used both as the name of the people as well as their spoken language.

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the ritual, Friedson (2009) argues that the combination of sound and movement evokes history and culture. Through these mediums, the gods communicate what to do, in terms of healing or addressing calamities on behalf of individuals and the community at large. There is a strong belief in witchcraft. It is claimed that for the Akan, misfortunes such as crop failure, the death of children and particularly health issues are attributed to witchcraft operated by an enemy or opponent (Mendonsa 2002). Practitioners of witchcraft are considered malicious and to prevent them from harming someone, one has to seek protection from the lesser gods (*abosom*) at the shrines. It is claimed that the gods can restrain, deter and punish witchcraft practitioners.

The Akan believe in medicine men and women (*aduroyefo*) that protect people against illnesses and danger. Many may even prevent death. In most cases, medicine men and women have also been priests and priestesses who serve lesser gods at various shrines. They believe that bad spirits can cause illnesses, much like offending the ancestors can cause diseases. There is the need, therefore, to maintain a good relationship with the supernatural. Folk healers consult their gods (*abosom*) before they administer healing. It is believed that the gods direct them as to what to do and communicate to them knowledge about herbs or medicine(s) to cure illnesses. It is also claimed there are instances in which the lesser gods have refused to help in diagnosing illnesses, due to the gravity of an offense by a patient or his family to the ancestors or the gods. The result has been death. It is believed that, if such wrongs are corrected by confessing and by not offending the gods, health is restored. The priests or priestesses possess the qualities of medicine men (Warren 1986). Mohr wrote that “native medicine aside, individuals experiencing various problems relating to sickness and misfortune in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would consult these various practitioners to restore their health. Afflicted individuals had several options: they could consult a healer, an amulet maker, a herbalist or a medicine maker” (2009: 442). From the above, it can be deduced that the belief system of the Akan is based on three worlds; namely, the human world, the spiritual world, and the natural world. In Akan traditional belief, spirit mediums function as linkages between mortal beings and the ancestral spirits (Mawere 2011).

Initially, the arrival of European missionaries and particularly the influence of the Basel Mission in Ghana did not affect indigenous healing structures. Akan Christians continued to use indigenous therapeutic approaches during the early years of the Basel missionaries in Ghana. The Basel Mission in Ghana was established in 1828 but was not successful in converting the indigenous people at the initial stages of their missionary work. This is because they failed to address the spiritual needs of the indigenous people. Even though healing and deliverance was part of the

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Basel Mission message, no healing centre was established in Ghana. The Basel missionaries devised means of separating Akan Christians from Akan religious practices which they considered a “fetish.” In effect, Basel Christianity sought to demonise Akan religious practices, but the traditional healing practices coexisted with the influence of the church (Mohr 2009: 443).

Mohr argued that both European missionaries and Akan Christians were healed by Akan healers until the late 1880s. However, in the nineteenth century, the church had grown considerably upon its establishment in Akropong, an Akan community in Ghana. The earliest account of healing in the Basel congregation occurred at Larteh in the nineteenth century when a Ghanaian catechist, Edward Samson, apparently raised a boy from the dead. From the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the Basel missionaries introduced biomedicine that could offer some care. However, biomedicine could not address the many illnesses caused by evil spirits. When the Basel missionaries departed from Ghana, the church had grown and trained local pastors, catechists, and teachers. In 1926, the Basel Mission in Ghana was named the Presbyterian Church of the Gold Coast. Later the name was changed to Presbyterian Church of Ghana with Ghanaians as leaders. Akan Christians continued to seek healthcare from Akan healers until the mid-twentieth century when many Christian sects began “religious healing practices that provided ritual protection against the evil spirits believed to cause disease and misfortune” (Mohr 2009: 453). This was the beginning of Pentecostalism in Ghana.

### **Pentecostalism in Ghana**

After the Basel missionary’s attempts at imposing western Christianity, Ghanaian Christians sought an African identity in their new Christian faith. The concept of Pentecostalism developed as a tool for decolonising the minds of Ghanaians and to address the worldview of Ghanaians with regard to the belief in spirits. In Ghanaian Pentecostalism, there is great emphasis on the Holy Spirit (Omenyo 2006). The Ghanaian Pentecostal believe that through the Holy Spirit, one can speak in tongues, be capable of prophecy, see visions, heal and perform miracles (White 2017). For the Akan Christian, this is the context within which salvation is perceived and appropriated (Larbi 2001). According to Amanor (2004), many indigenous prophets and prophetesses had begun showing signs of Pentecostalism in parts of Ghana. They sought to revive the Ghanaian Christian faith by emphasising healing based on faith and the exorcism of evil spirits. The idea of evil spirits is a concept introduced by western Christianity. One influence came from William Wade Harris, a Liberian *Grebo* (Kru) preacher and prophet who (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997: 107) came to the Axim and Apollonia Districts in Ghana in 1914. He preached against fetishes and claimed that fetishism was the work of the devil. In his evangelic works, Harris used music. The *mfoba* (see Figure 1) musical instrument

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was important in his activities. His approach embedded cultural understandings of viewing God and Christianity. Harris allowed his converts “to sing traditional songs in praise of God’s name” (Amanor 2004: 16). There is no written account indicating that Harris established a church. Many of his converts joined existing missionary churches. There were a few who did not join any church but started their own. Due to this development, many churches emerged as a way of serving the spiritual needs of their members (Asare 2015). Prominent among them are the African Indigenous Churches (AICs).

### **The African Instituted Churches (AICs) and the Twelve Apostles Church in Ghana**

The AICs bridged the gap between indigenous and Christian concepts of worship, healing, and wellbeing (Mendonsa 2002, Akogyeram 2006, Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997, Mbiti 1977, Clarke 2004). The AICs are known in Ghana, especially among the Akan, as “sunsum nsore” (spiritual churches) (Baeta 1962, Clarke 2006) and their practices present a framework for understanding the practices of the Twelve Apostles Church. Daneel described the AICs “as protest movements in relation to oppressive colonial government, as reactionary groups that resent the paternalistic approach of missionaries or as deliberate attempts to adapt Christian belief and worship to their specific ethno-religious background” (Daneel 1974: 17, cf Akogyeram 2006, Oosthuizen 1989). The establishment of these churches was a way for Africans to worship God using African idioms and modes of understanding (Amanor 2004, White 2017, Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). The main aim of the AICs was to Africanise or Indigenise Christianity from an African perspective and fight for their freedom from missionary domination (Mbiti 1977). This view was also expressed by leaders of the TAC. Apostle Otoo remarked that “for us in the ‘sunsum nsore’, we worship God with our cultural understanding and not through influences from the white man with things we hardly understand” (Interview 4 September 2017).<sup>3</sup> For Africans, worshipping in the mission churches was dull. Mbiti wrote that the foreign tunes had less rhythm and the music did not inspire bodily movements, there was no clapping of hands and no “twisting the loins as a religious expression” (1977: 234). The formation of the AICs was a way of reversing the disintegration of traditional religious practice.

In Ghana, the most important part of worship is the answer to the individual’s spiritual problems and needs, including good health and general wellbeing. Mendonsa remarked that the African Christian is not particular about salvation, but observed that “West Africans seemed to be more interested in healing and dealing with misfortune or uncertainty in the present” (2002: 97). In African traditional belief, misfortunes, diseases and bad luck, in general, are caused by evil

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<sup>3</sup> All interviews were translated from *Fante* to English.

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spirits, witches and wizards. People are afraid of such forces and it is claimed that the Western (missionary) churches could not provide answers for such spiritual concerns raised by Africans. Ayegboyin and Ishola argued that “indeed sickness is by far the most common reason which people give for attending AICs” (1997: 29). AICs became a means through which spiritual problems were dealt with in a “Christian way.” Their practices were believed to counteract such spiritual powers and address spiritual concerns by giving solutions during outbreaks of plague, famine, economic depression and most importantly, restoring health (Mendonsa 2002). Among such indigenous churches in Ghana is the Twelve Apostles Church, which was the first of the AICs in Ghana.

The Twelve Apostles Church was established by John Nackabah and Grace Tani who were converts of Harris in 1917-18. The church is also known as the Church of William Harris and is most often referred to as *Awoyo* or *Nackabah* (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997).<sup>4</sup> The various names have come about as a result of the historical transformations the church experienced. The church based its practices on the work of Harris (Ayegboyin and Ishola 1997: 107). Even though it is said that Harris did not form a church, the Twelve Apostles Church believes that it was two of his converts, Grace Tani and John Nackabar, (both “fetish” priests) who started the church in late 1917 and early 1918 through their mobilisation after Harris had departed from Ghana. Tani and Nackabah met in 1918 when the former fell sick and was healed by the latter. It was after this encounter that the two started working together not as a church but by converting other people. However, their converts were not accepted into the missionary churches because they could easily be possessed, which was against the practices of those churches. These missionary churches did not allow the converts to play the *mfoba* because it was associated with fetishism. Consequently, the “Nackabah people” came together and began to practice their new faith. Grace Tani and John Nackabah became the leaders of this movement. With time they developed new approaches to healing such as “water-carrying.” They combined indigenous practices of healing with prayers in their rituals.

The movement started growing in different parts of the country as the two leaders travelled to heal people. Occasionally, they visited such places to see how the newly established were doing. According to Breidenbach, “as Harris had done with Maame Tani, the elder who converted an individual, then deemed as someone who had a ‘proper spirit’ to work with, set the person up in a village or town to carry out healing activities” (1979: 595). The movement faced two major challenges. The first was that they operated as a church but the church was not authorised

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<sup>4</sup> *Awoyo* is a popular greeting for members of the Twelve Apostles Church while the name “*Nackabar*” is based on the name of the co-founder John Nackabar, who was seen as the main administrator of the church and as the de-facto leader.

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and given clearance by the missionaries. It had components of indigenous practices and beliefs associated with their practices, but was not a sanctioned and recognised institution. The colonial administrators and missionaries would take any opportunity available to close the movement by associating it with fetishism. In the same vein, the traditional authorities would see it as invading the authority of traditional powers including those of the priests. Therefore, despite the growth of the movement, the leaders could not register it as a church. However, the church was officially registered in Ghana in 1962 to return to a style of worship through African means. The phrase, “African means”, is important. Based on the practices of Harris, the church exploits African or Ghanaian indigenous values and structures in worshipping God and respects traditional systems in certain areas, such as family and health-related issues. The most important sacred objects used in the church for worship, based on Prophet Harris’s practices, are the use of the Holy Bible, a wooden cross, a cup, blessed water (*nhyira nsuo*) and most importantly, the *mfoba*.

### The proceedings

Figure 1 is a picture of various sizes of *mfoba*. It is a gourd rattle surrounded by nets of beads which is played by shaking the instrument back and forth or in circles. In the TAC, it is known as calabas (calabash). It is seen as sacred and always kept in sacred places such as below the wooden cross. For adepts, it is the most important instrument in the healing ritual. For the healers ‘*eyi na ]dze fr[ sunsum*’ (this instrument is used to invoke the Holy Spirit). It was claimed that when the instrument is played evil spirits become vulnerable and flee upon hearing the sound of the *mfoba*.



Figure 1. Mfoba (enmeshed gourd rattle). Photograph by Author.

The church believes that Harris used the calabash to cast out demons and as followers of Harris it is incumbent upon them to follow in his steps. In my observations, I realised there was no single healing ritual without the *mfoba*. It was either played by males or females or both. Characteristically they are played by women as Harris' wives did during his time. However, it was observed that during the first stage of the healing ritual where the music was slow, the *mfoba* was mostly played by women. Anytime the music intensified, the men mostly played the *mfoba*. This was due to the longer duration of the music and how fast it intensified. That is not to say that the women were not strong enough to play. Most of them explained that at this point in the ritual, they preferred joining in the chorus rather than playing.

In the healing ritual, patients tremble upon hearing the sound of the *mfoba*. The trembling generates a possessed dance which sometimes becomes so intense that patients are held down by others. According to Friedson "the resultant spirit-possession dance is in the first instance often therapy for those afflicted" (Friedson 1996: xii). This is because patients who were not able to walk or move were able to respond to movements when possessed through music. It is, however, the same sound of the *mfoba* and singing that causes possession in healers, but this time the possession is by the Holy Spirit. In a possessed or trance state, healers speak in strange languages similar to the Christian concept of "tongues" and only understood by the Holy Spirit. I was told by healer Mary, that her helping sunsum called "*Awudu*"<sup>5</sup> only comes and possesses her when the sound of the *mfoba* and singing are heightened (Interview 1 July 2015). She told me she dances to the heightened music and enters into a trance. I witnessed one healing session when she was possessed by *Awudu*. *Awudu* spoke through her asking me if she treated me well.

The TAC gives the Ghanaian Christian room to exercise a more independent form of worship. Each member is fully involved in the worship with shouting, clapping, singing and dancing. During the colonial era, drumming and dancing in worship were declared illegal because European missionaries associated them with paganism (Mendonsa 2002). However, with the breakaway from the western form of worship, most of the songs the AICs sing are based on their traditions. In the healing rituals of the Twelve Apostles Church, numerous encounters with songs, drumming and dancing come together to form one entity. This is a healing situation filled with musical phenomena. Through performance both patients and healers are transported elsewhere (Colson 1969, Diallo and Mitchell 1989). The healing ritual is known as *edwuma* (the work). The *edwuma* is not merely any work but that of the *sunsum* (spirit). The church refers to the entire healing process as *Sunsum Edwuma* (spiritual work). *Y[rebfy] Ne ho Edwuma* (to work on a person)

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<sup>5</sup> *Awudu* is a spirit, which a prophetess referred to as an angel of God that helps with the healing.

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is the household phrase used to refer to the healing ritual. The ritual takes place at the “garden” (church), which is the residence of the healer. A wooden cross is erected in the “garden” and this serves as a sacred place where the entire ritual is performed.

### Musical culture of the Twelve Apostles Church

The musical culture of the Twelve Apostles Church is regimented. Section 1 in Article 55 of the church by-laws on instruments states that “The instruments usually played in the Twelve Apostles Church, Ghana, shall be: (a) Calabash and ‘Dondo’, but apart from these two instruments, which are strictly recommended for healing purposes on Fridays, general rules of Christian doctrine are applicable together with the clapping of hands.” Handclapping serves as an accompaniment and is most importantly employed to keep the time of the music (Agawu 2003). During worship and healing rituals, in particular, all adepts contribute to the music and the general sonic experience through handclapping and shouting. Unlike other Christian sects, the TAC employs Ghanaian traditional musical styles such as *Nnwomkoro*<sup>6</sup> (same songs) and the use of traditional instruments in their healing rituals. Apart from the healing ritual, their musical approach to other aspects of their worship is similar to other Christian denominations. There are choirs that sing Ghanaian choral music with Biblical texts and gospel songs for praises and worship. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these other genres of music performed in the church as they are not directly linked with the healing ritual. In the healing ritual, the music is solely traditional. Other Christian denominations also employ similar musical styles but refer to them as *Abibidwom* (indigenous songs) not necessarily for healing. However, during the healing ritual the music is easily identifiable because of their unique use of the *mfoba* and *dondo*.

The church claims that the songs used in the healing ritual are spiritual and useful for healing purposes. Every illness has its accompanying songs. They claim that most of the illnesses encountered in the church are caused by bad spirits. When they sing, the spirit of affliction has to “come out” from the patient to free him or her from the bondage of such bad spirits. Singing during the healing ritual is important. Most of the songs are created and composed in the moment while many others are already in existence. Healer White told me that “we believe there is God’s spirit that brings songs on the lips of worshippers. The inspiration to come up with new compositions is always from God” (Interview 5 June 2015). While they “sing the illness” during the healing ritual, the *mfoba* is used to invoke spirits, especially in situations when the *edwuma* is a difficult one. The *dondo* helps in putting patients into trance states (Faseun 2008, Turner 1968). The *dondo* is the hourglass drum (see Figure 2) found in West Africa. It has both ends covered with animal skin and

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<sup>6</sup> *Nnwomkoro* is an ensemble that consists of singing, clapping and drumming within the Akan tradition and mostly performed by women with men playing minor roles in the ensembles.

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is normally played with a curved stick. It always has strings woven into the tip of the animal skin to fit into the wooden frame. It is used as a rhythmic accompaniment to the singing. Generally, it is believed that the sound from the *dondo*, when played continuously, helps to entrance people. The instrument produces either a high or low-pitched sound depending on how the player squeezes the strings when playing.

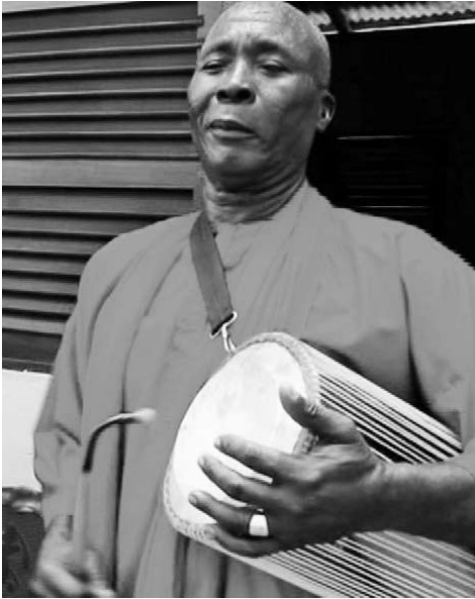


Figure 2. A healer playing the dondo (hourglass drum).

Photograph by Author.

The environment, atmosphere, and setting of the healing ritual contribute to the sonic and aesthetic experience. During the healing ritual, adepts wear red coloured dresses and gather around the wooden cross which is believed the most sacred place in the “garden.” I was told that the colour red signifies the blood of Jesus Christ and it helps in the healing process. Another reason is that the red coloured dresses show how serious they are during the healing ritual. The communal participation of the ritual suggests that the issue of

hierarchy or power is of less importance. Singing, shouting, clapping, dancing and the playing of the *mfofa* is not for a selected few. The only exception is the playing of the *dondo* which is performed by males.

Even though songs are initiated by anyone present during the healing ritual, it is mostly led by the healers who have been trained in singing and most importantly, on how to sing about every situation in the healing ritual. Healers are trained musically before they begin healing. The general training is informal. Individuals are purposely chosen to lead the musical activities during the healing ritual because they have the gift of singing and composing songs or have been actively involved in the healing ritual for several years. The authority as to whose duty it is to be responsible for the overall music is not important as far as the practices of the TAC are concerned.

### Stages in the musical healing ritual

In the analysis of the data, I have identified the following five stages of the musical healing ritual of the TAC. The entire ritual takes place at the “garden”, the residence of the healers. The first stage is the preliminary stage where patients are prepared

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for the healing session. The family and the audience (mostly church members, though open to everybody) are present either as participants who join in singing, clapping or dancing or as observers. The healer, the patient(s), the family of the patient(s), church members and audience are ushered into the healing process with music; that is, slow rhythms and soft singing together with hand clapping. This stage commences with music, prayer, and carrying water. Carrying water is where patients carry their water for the bathing (during the bathing stage) except in situations where illness does not allow a patient to carry the water. In such cases, a family member of the patient carries the water on behalf of the patient. This stage is referred to as the “first-aid stage.”

The lyrics to the songs at this stage of the ritual are centred on giving thanks to God and inviting Him into the midst of the worshippers to guide the ritual. The slow 6/8 rhythms with the call and response singing, the clapping of the hands, the playing of the *dondo* and the sound of the *mfoba* (enmeshed rattle) consummates this performed experience.

The transcribed song in Figure 3 is in two sections. The first section is known as “*aho*” (prelude) and it introduces the theme of the song. The “*aho*” comes without any instrumental accompaniment (Ampomah 2014). The “*aho*” is initiated or led by the healer with the chorus performed by the congregation. The “*aho*” is sung in robbed time, such that the singer has the freedom to accelerate or retard the speed at his or her discretion. The singer has the freedom to slightly shift the melody and the speed of the song. The use of accelerating and slowing down in this part of the song is complementary. The lead singer accelerates from bar one through to bar two but slows down in bar three where the chorus comes in to establish a steady speed for the response.

The second section of the song is performed strictly to the rhythm at a moderate tempo with the *mfoba*, *dondo*, and handclapping serving as accompaniment. The accompaniment offers a steady rhythm to the song. In the second section, any member of the congregation can take up the role as the lead singer. This usually prolongs the singing as there could be many singers who alternate as lead singers in one song. Whereas the handclapping is performed by the congregation, few adepts play the *mfoba*. The reason is that it demands great energy, skills, and stamina. At the first stage of the ritual, the women usually play the *mfoba* as the music is not yet as intense as in the latter part. Patients enter carrying their water while singing and the water is placed under the wooden cross. Patients join the rest of the congregation in singing and the clapping of hands. While the singing, clapping of hands and bodily movements occur, the healer raises a white cup of water to the sky and offers a prayer to God to bless the water for effective use in the healing. The water in the white cup is then poured into the buckets of water belonging to patients.

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*Tempo rubato*

Call  
Y'ahyia Wodin mu'a - ye-re-twen Wo O-nya - me'a ye-tw're Wo'a, A-se-da ye-de-ma Wo a-kwan nyi-na

Response  
Wo Ye-tw're Wo'a ye-de-ma Wo a-kwan nyi-na

**Moderato** (♩ = c. 108)

Cal  
mu'o. Y'a-hyia Wo din mu'a ye-re-twen Wo, ɔ-sa ba-ri-ma'e, ye-re-twen

Res  
mu'o.

Handclaps

Mfoba

Dondo

17

Cal  
Wo ɔ-sa-ba-ri ma'e, ye-re-twen Wo

Res  
Y'a-hyia Wo-din mu'a, ye-re-twen Wo'a-ra Y'a-hyia Wo-din mu'a, ye-re-twen Wo'a-ra

Handclaps

Mfoba

Dondo

Figure 3: An example of thanksgiving songs at the first stage of the healing ritual.  
Transcription by Author.

The second stage is the identification stage. This takes the form of interrogations and communicative transactions. The interrogations are performed by the healers and are often intense. Answers from the spirits of affliction are vigorously demanded from possessed patients. Through interrogation or communicative transaction, the causes of illnesses are made known (Breidenbach 1978, Kleiman 1980). During the interrogation, two types of *sunsum* manifest themselves: the *sunsum kronkron* (Holy

Spirit, from God) and the *sunsum b]ne* (bad spirit) responsible for the illness. With the help of the *sunsum kronkron* the healer can identify and make contact with the *sunsum b]ne*. Upon a series of interrogations, the *sunsum b]ne* responsible for the illness then states the reason for attacking the patient in a process Breidenbach identifies as the “identification and the Statement of Message” (1978: 98). In other words, the claimed *sunsum b]ne* of affliction is identified and it is after the identification that the spirit states its reason for afflicting the patient.

In many interrogations, the healers have to “force” the evil *sunsum* before they speak out about the cause and reason for a particular illness. In other interrogations, the healers have to beg on behalf of the patient so that healing can be affected. In musical healing such as that of the Twelve Apostles church “where therapeutic intervention is based on etiology, these diagnoses are crucial to clinical efficacy” (Friedson 1996: 9, Akombo 2006). The music at this point is designed to invite the *sunsum kronkron* for the *edwuma*. The singing, clapping and playing of *mfoba* and the *dondo* drumming are intensified. The lyrics are those of an invitation to the angels and the Holy Spirit’s manifestation so that all the secrets for the cause of an illness will be revealed. Yet, with the intensifying music, spirit possessions on the part of patients also occur. The structure of the songs remains call and response but with an increasing speed. From the preliminary or preparatory stage, patients are normally calm and seem not to question healers. However, at the diagnosis stage, when the music becomes more intense and spirit possessions occur, it is believed that patients are controlled by the evil spirits that have possessed them. The behaviour exhibited by the possessed patient is claimed to be influenced by the evil spirit. The text below is a transcription of one of the songs sung to invoke the spirit of God for the *sunsum edwuma*:

**Fante**

*Adom a y[fr[’w sunsum oo*

*Sunsum ei ]mmra oo*

*Nyame b]fo] y[ nnye wo di akoara y[n suro*

*Oo Nyame ne sunsum aa, ayaa ]mmra aa*

**Translation in English**

We invoke you, the spirit of grace

Come, spirit

We are not afraid dealing with the  
angel of God

Descend, Oh spirit of God.

The event involved a healer, a girl (patient) and *bosom* (deity) in a church at Anomabo Taedo, a village near Cape Coast. The parents claimed the girl (their daughter) had been afflicted by illness for about two years. They had been moving to many different places for her health to be restored but to no avail. There were few church members around when the ritual began. The girl went through the water carrying aspect successfully. The interrogative ritual started afterward with lots of singing, clapping and playing of *mfoba*. The healer became possessed by the *sunsum kronkron*. The healer started speaking in tongues, a language no one

understood. The healer grabbed the patient and started to rub her forehead against the patient's forehead. The healer picked up a Bible and hit the patient's stomach with it a few times. This stage was about 45 minutes long, until the girl became possessed by an *obosom*. After possession had taken place the music ceased.

From this moment when the cause of the illness was known, there was more singing and playing of the *mfoba* to thank God for revealing the cause of the illness. The girl became dispossessed after the cause of her illness was known.

Spirit possessions that populate the healing rituals of the Twelve Apostles Church exist in the world of exorcism as musical sounds – “not sounds as a symbol of these beings, but these beings literally manifested as music” (Friedson 1996: xv). In the healing ritual, the spirit of God that restores health and that which western Christians describe as evil spirit “are made coexistent in the single and continuous flowing motion of music and dance... both deities and demons are constituted of the same fundamental units of sound and gesture” (Kapferer 1986: 199). When possessions of both healers and patients have taken place, the music ends for the interrogation or communicative transaction to take place. When the cause of an illness is identified, music and dance resume. Patients are out of the trance and it is believed that the bad spirit has left the patient but the healer remains possessed by the *sunsum Kronkron*. At this point, there is a change in the rhythm and time of the music. The 4/4 rhythm puts the audience and church members in a joyous mood. They thank God for revealing the secrets of the evil one.

In Figure 4, the song does not begin with an “*aho*” because it is believed that at that stage of the healing ritual, the Holy Spirit had already been invited. At this stage, the song is always in common time and suitable for dance. The lyrics are focused on giving thanks to God for revealing the cause of an illness to the healer.

The third stage of the healing ritual is known as the revelation and divination stage. In Ghana, religious practices are based on the belief that knowledge about spiritual truth is gained through revelations, spirit possessions and divination. Revelation, as used within the context of this article, is a supernatural knowledge capable of making known the unknown through dreams or visions from supernatural sources (Mawere 2011). Normally this stage within the Twelve Apostles Church is private and unobservable to others as they are in the form of dreams, though some occur in public through visions. It is claimed that the unknown problems and solutions are made known through revelations where there is an interaction between the healer and the supernatural. Through dreams, healers claim that they have encounters with diverse spirits through which they provide healing.

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♩ = 130

Cantor  
Mo ma yen nda Nya - me ase - daa

Chorus  
Daa A -

Handclapping

Dondo

Mfoba

C  
5 Yen nda - Nya - me - ase - daa A - men. Yen nda Nya - me - ase men. 1. 2.

Ch  
5 men daa - A - men men.

Hc

Do

Mf

Figure 4: An example of a song that offers thanks to God for revealing the secret to an illness, normally sung with joy. Transcription by Author.

Divination is directly related to revelation in the sense that the healers claim it is a way of gaining insight into a spiritual problem. Through divination, healers are told how to treat an illness whether in the form of reparation or they are shown in a dream a particular herb for the treatment of a disease. Revelations could occur to healers, patients or family members of patients. Sometimes it occurs in a third party who is a church member. Madina, the patient who went through the interrogation described above, said, "I had a dream one day and I was asked by the spirit of the

*bosom* who wanted me to serve the deity to choose death, schizophrenia or suicide if I refused to serve them” (Interview 2 July 2014). Comfort, Madina’s healer, explained that “in the course of the *sunsum edwuma*, the *bosom* spirit demanded the following items for reparation: sorghum, rice, cola, red cloth, money (coins), and oil. They demanded these because the patient spiritually accepted to serve them so they needed to be compensated” (Interview 2 July 2014). Adwoa, a patient of Comfort explained that “in my sleep, I saw that a frog had been taken from my throat. It looked like I was being operated without cuts. That was the beginning of my healing” (Interview 13 May 2016). Apostle Otoo remarked that “sometimes it’s spiritual warfare. We have to battle with the evil spirits before health is restored. They are powerful but God has given us the *mfoba* which when we play and sing, they (evil spirits) cannot stand it and have to flee” (Interview 20 August 2015).

The music and dance usher the attendees into the fourth stage. The stage of bathing is where the possessed healer does the bathing of the patients with the *nhyira nsuo* (blessed water). Even though the bathing is not elaborate, it is considered the most important aspect of the healing ritual. The *nhyira nsuo* is applied to the affected area of a patient. The healers claimed that they apply the *nhyira nsuo* based on what the Holy Spirit communicated to them. There are instances where a healer keeps the *nhyira nsuo* in his or her mouth and spits it on the affected area(s) of a patient. This signifies purification and cleansing. It is the music that holds the entire bathing ritual together. A prophet told me that without the music, *adom* (grace) will not descend and the *edwuma* (work) cannot be successful. Based on this, the phenomenological understanding of “working on a patient” is well understood since it is the healer who bathes the patient. Male healers are in charge of bathing male patients whereas women healers take care of the women patients. After bathing, there is continuous singing and dancing for a while and the lyrics are about the end of the entire healing ritual. The ritual ends with the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. The text below is a transcription of one of the songs signifying the end of the healing ritual:

### **Fante**

*Y’awie, y’awie, y’awie*  
*Y’awie edwuma yi, y’awie*  
*Y’awie edwuma yi, y’awie*

### **English translation**

We are done, we are done, we are done  
 We are done with the work, we are done  
 We are done with the work, we are done

The fifth stage is an uninterrupted ritual on its own. It is common to see more than two patients undergoing daily treatment after going through the above stages. The process here is slightly different from the ones described above. There are morning and evening devotions every day. These devotions are very significant in the healing process. The devotion is filled with music. The call and response singing and the



playing of the *mfoba* begins in a very slow 6/8 rhythm. Hand clapping is used as a rhythmic accompaniment to the singing. The musical performance takes up nearly eighty percent of the devotion. For the adepts of the church, the *nyyira nsuo* (blessed water), also known as *abura*, is curative.<sup>7</sup> Though ordinary water, they believe that once it is blessed by a healer like prophet Harris did, it goes a long way to facilitate the healing. The buckets of water placed under the cross are blessed for patients to use for bathing. At this stage, patients do the bathing themselves. The same process occurs in the evening devotions. This routine is repeated every day for a few months, and sometimes over many years until a patient is fully healed. Should this stage fail, then the patient may exhibit “irremediable schism” (Friedson 1996: 272), a therapeutic default which may result in death (Akombo 2006).

The concept of *ebibi duru* (herbal medicine) is important to the healing. *Ebibi duru* is the use of herbs on patients as a supplementary treatment of an illness, especially those that are physically evident. Though not practiced all the time, the application of *ebibi duru* is one of the effective ways of treating patients. Through dreams, healers claim God reveals to them particular herbs for use in the treatment of certain illnesses. The healers I interviewed told me that upon receiving revelations in dreams about herbs, they wake up from the dream very happily and sing songs of praise to God. On their way to collecting the herbs, they engage themselves in singing. Rev Sackey told me “it is all joy when I finally get the herb that was revealed to me. I walk back home with songs of praise, thanking God for giving me the herbs” (Interview 17 August 2016). In the preparation of the herbs for treatment, songs are sung and prayers are said. Most of the patients I met who were suffering from physical illnesses confirmed that they would have died, had they not sought healing from the Twelve Apostles Church. Amos said: “I came here when I had this eye problem. My family and I had gone to different hospitals but it kept getting worse. We got here and by the grace of God my condition is improving” (Interview 11 July 2014).

### **Musical set-up during the ritual**

The use of the human voice is vital in the entire healing process. The voice is uniquely used, especially in the interrogations and most importantly in singing. As stated earlier, the women in the church use their voices, especially in initiating songs. The voice is used to communicate with the people during the ritual. Through the lyrics of songs, one learns what the ritual is about, the kind of situation the healer is dealing with as far as the healing is concerned and what the illness is about.

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<sup>7</sup> *Abura* (well) is a hole of water from the earth. Mostly found at the compounds of most of the healers of the Twelve Apostles Church. Perhaps because of the constant use of water as a major part of the healing ritual, it is only economical to have an *Abura* at the healers compound for such purposes.

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After one of the healing rituals I witnessed, the healer explained that the cause of the illness was as a result of the patient offending bad spirits and God. Therefore, the lyrics of the songs were those directly asking for forgiveness on the part of the patient. The text below is a transcription of one such song:

<b>Fante</b>	<b>English translation</b>
<i>B]ne bia way[ faky[n</i>	Forgive her of all her sins
<i>Adam nana, ne b]ne bia na</i>	Descendant of Adam, whatever sins
<i>Na way[ a, faky[na</i>	Committed by her, forgive her
<i>Adam ne Eve nana nyen</i>	A descendant of Adam and Eve
<i>B]ne mpa ne ho a daa</i>	Sin is always around her
<i>B]ne bia n'a w'ay[ a faky[n n'a</i>	Forgive her of all her sins.

Adepts claim that every sickness has its song or group of songs. A prophetess remarked that “we sing the sickness at hand” during the healing ritual (Interview 1 2014). This means that the singers sing about the sickness or compose songs around the cause of the sickness or the problem involved with the *Sunsum Edwuma*. Clarke wrote that singing and dancing is the language of the transcendent; the conduit line through which the presence of the supernatural may be invoked. The essence of music as ‘orality’ is seen as its ability to project the worshipper into the spirit-world. In the ‘trance’ of song ‘all is spirit’...the worshipper becomes transcendent into the realm of the spirit-world (2004: 255).

The songs are sung in the vernacular. This provides the worshippers the chance to fully express themselves and their belief system. The human voice in the ritual depicts the tonal possibilities of the songs. The Akan language and Ghanaian language, in general, are very tonal. The language has three phonemic tones of high, mid and low (Abakah 2005). The meaning of words is dependent on tone pitch. The pitch levels of the voice determine the meaning of songs. The combination of two or more pitches contributes to the texture of the music. The intonation, contour, and rhythms of song texts generally follow the voice or speech inflections (Nketia 1974, Agordoh 2010). The melody and the rhythmic pattern of the other instruments are interwoven. The harmonic structures employed in the singing, are mostly thirds and sixths below the main melody (Nketia 1974) (see Figure 3). There are always two or three-part harmonies characteristic of Ghanaian indigenous singing practices. It is not surprising to hear four-part harmony in indigenous singing practices in Ghana. This practice has an impact on the nature of singing associated with the healing ritual of the TAC. The songs have short phrases repeated over and over again with improvisations. The songs are rendered in call and response form. However, anyone can lead the song at any point in time. It is possible for one to

initiate a song as the cantor and after a phrase or two, another can pick up the same song assuming the position of a second cantor. When a second cantor enters, the melody is varied most of the time. Occasionally, many of the singers hum the melody instead of singing.

Ululation is also practiced in the style of singing and the healing ritual. Ululation is used as a way of “making a joyful noise unto the Lord”, as claimed by the adepts of the church. A strong emotion of joy is expressed by ululating amidst the singing. This is normally performed by any of the attendees during the ritual. It is mostly utilised when the cause of an illness is found during the healing ritual. The vocal decorations in the form of ululations, shouting and whistling on one hand, and the combination of sounds from the *mfoba* and *dondo* on the other hand, combine to create additional layers contributing to the texture of the music. All these sonic expressions contribute to the healing because it is believed that patients are likely to be involved in at least one of these musical activities.

The music in the healing ritual involves the use of polyrhythms. The hand-clapping, *mfoba*, and *dondo* present different rhythmic structures yet they are coordinated by a regulatory beat.

The figure displays musical notation for three rhythmic layers: Mfoba, Dondo, and Handclapping, all in 4/4 time. The Mfoba part consists of a steady eighth-note pattern. The Dondo part features a more complex, syncopated eighth-note pattern. The Handclapping part is a simple, steady quarter-note pattern. Below this, a second system shows a 'mf' part with a similar eighth-note pattern to Mfoba, a 'don' part with a syncopated eighth-note pattern similar to Dondo, and an 'Hc' part with a steady quarter-note pattern similar to Handclapping. The notation includes stems, beams, and various rhythmic markings such as accents and slurs.

Figure 5. Example of polyrhythmic patterns of *mfoba*, *dondo*, and handclapping used in the healing ritual. Transcription by Author.

As shown in Figure 5, multiple layers of rhythms are interwoven. The three layers show different instruments with distinct patterns within the 4/4 regulatory beat. I treat the handclapping as a percussive instrument.

## Conclusions

It is impossible to discuss every aspect of the musical healing rituals of the TAC in this article. The approach to the healing ritual of the TAC is based on the cultural understanding of beliefs, norms, values and communicative transactions associated with health care. There are many aspects of the healing ritual that may be carefully studied. Throughout the ritual, there are specific gendered roles that could be of further interest. A careful study of why singing and dancing are mostly initiated by women, drumming by men, and women easily possessed during the ritual and many more elements may also require further research. While western medical healing continues to present scientific modes of healing, the TAC continues to employ an indigenous model of health care and wellbeing whose efficacy is made possible with music. The cultural understanding of adepts of the TAC has been a major contributing factor to the success of this healing ritual.

Singing, dancing, clapping and drumming are more than an aesthetic experience in the healing ritual of the TAC. This is not to say that aesthetic experiences are not part of the experiences of healers and their patients, but rather fashioned to “call forth and shape spiritual energy” (Friedson 1996: 35). When prophets and prophetesses from the Twelve Apostles Church explicitly talk about the healing rituals, they approach it musically and spiritually. Music’s position as an important aspect of “medical technology, frames its phenomenological presence” (ibid.) towards good health and wellbeing.

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