

BRASS BAND MUSIC IN GHANA: THE INDIGENISATION OF EUROPEAN MILITARY MUSIC

by

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Abstract: Local brass bands have become an indispensable factor in weddings, processions, rituals of birth or death, at Christmas and New Year festivities in many parts of the globe. Remains of European brass bands are widely distributed throughout Africa, India, Indonesia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. These bands are of both military and missionary origin. They are an important component of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial expressive culture. Despite their uniqueness and widespread presence across the world, brass bands have received limited attention in Ghana. This paper aims to address this lack by offering a comprehensive account of the contemporary situation of brass band music in Ghana. I trace the history of this musical world and explore the diverse ways military and missionary activities have shaped amateur brass band musical activities in Ghana. I discuss the distribution and band formations across Ghana, viewing it in five sections that detail different types of brass bands; church, town, service, school and “sharbo” bands. I continue by looking at the beginning, development, workings and indigenisation of European military music in local popular culture and provide an account of brass band music as observed in Ghana today. I argue that indigenisation is not a straightforward process of adaptation, rather, indigenisation is a process of ongoing aesthetic tensions and differences resulting in new musical forms and new forms of socialisation organised around musical performance.

Keywords: Brass band, brass instruments, military bands, colonialism, culture contact, indigenisation, Ghana.

Introduction

The brass band is derived from colonial bands, of both military and missionary origin, which were an important component of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial expressive culture (Okyere 2016, Reily and Brucher 2013).¹ The function and symbolism attached to bands and brass instruments were central in the construction of an image of the colonial empire. Bands helped to authenticate ideas of authority, particularly, European notions of order and discipline, through military power exercised in colonial social life. It is certain that the establishment of most British-imposed music cultures on its colonies was augmented by some form of brass or military band. Ranger’s assessment of the usefulness of music as a “representation of order and contrast to the

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inexplicable monotonies of African drumming,” as it played out in Zanzibar, is equally applicable in many ways to the situation in Ghana (1975: 13).

The introduction of brass bands in Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) and the ensuing indigenisation of the brass band style by local musicians provide a view into the complexity surrounding cultural change and exchange in the colonial context. The subsequent transformation of European brass band music and performance practice in Ghana provides an opportunity for understanding the resilience and adaptability of deeply rooted cultural and musical values within dynamically shifting political, social, and economic conditions (Rumbolz 2000). Despite their uniqueness and widespread presence across Ghana, the fact remains that more research needs to be conducted on how these processes unfolded.

While the introduction of colonial brass bands in Ghana has been touched upon by scholars such as Boonzajer-Flaes 1999, Boonzajer-Flaes and Gales 1991, Collins 1992, Coplan 1985, Feld 2012, Mensah 1969/70, Plageman 2017, and Waterman 1990, its significance has largely been limited to its role as the precursor of a more fully realised, new musical tradition, “highlife.” In these accounts, the bands appear frozen in time, forever aligned with their colonial and missionary lineage.

This article is imperative for two reasons. According to Rumbolz (2000), Ghana was among the first West African points of European contact in the late fifteenth century. Further, Cape Coast and Elmina (historical towns with castles and forts) were once regarded as the home of brass band music in Ghana (J. Collins interview 14 December 2018). Today, most of the earliest bands have largely disappeared. There were a number of vibrant and famous bands in around the 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s that performed localised brass band genres such as the *adaha* (which later culminated in highlife music), *kokomba* and *atwum*, to which the local people danced. Today, the attention has shifted to school marching and church brigade bands. Currently, the school and church bands rarely perform local tunes. Instead, they perform slow and quick time marches and hymns for the school cadet-corps, and the boys’ and girls’ brigades.

I have enjoyed being a brass band musician in Ghana for more than ten years. I learned how to play the trumpet in a church band as a teenager and went on to become an academic and University wind band instructor. My fascination with brass bands led to a commitment to add to the body of knowledge on the various brass music cultures existing in Ghana. From March 2017 to December 2019, a variety of qualitative research techniques were employed. For data collection, I primarily used a rigorous participant-observation approach by spending time with brass bands to gain a deep understanding of their activities. I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with brass band owners, patrons and practitioners, and conducted an analysis of documents (books, newspapers, letters found in the National archives, Cape Coast and Elmina castles), audio and video recordings retrieved from the Institute of African Studies (I.A.S) Audio-Visual Archive, the University of Ghana and the John Collins’ Bokoor African Popular Music Archives Foundation (BAPMAF) archives.

Jeffrey and Troman (2004) indicate that ethnographic studies are expected to take

the form of a twelve month “sustained” period of data gathering. The length of time spent gathering data for the current research, however, took place over three years and was not sustained. Visits to the sites were intermittent throughout the period. Therefore, the methodological approach used in the research is a quasi-ethnographic design based mainly on the frequency of visits to the site (Murtagh 2007). This research was concerned with observing brass band musical activities across Ghana in their “natural settings”, gaining a deep understanding of the actions of practitioners and about discovery as opposed to testing a theory (*ibid.*: 195).

In this research, a decision was made to involve bands from diverse social groups in Ghana. Although this had implications for the length of time available for research, this decision facilitated the opportunity to explore the phenomenon of the band from multiple perspectives and to yield rich data. This research necessitated flexible approaches to the frequency of visits to the various regions, to conduct interviews and to discuss findings at various stages. Jeffrey and Troman (2004: 540) describe such an approach to ethnography, in terms of its timescale, as a “selective, intermittent time mode” where the frequency of visits to sites is determined by decisions as to whether or not the analytical categories have been “saturated.” The relationship between the extent of fieldwork and analysis is fluid and facilitates “the opportunity to decide during the process of research where to focus and the chance to respond to serendipitous events” (*ibid.*: 542).

Many local brass bands in the Central, Western, Eastern, Ashanti, Volta, Bono, Oti and Greater Accra regions of Ghana were observed. During visits, I took brief notes of key events and later shared the outcome of my observations with participants during informal discussions to clarify the accuracy of observations made. At one point I felt that my presence as an observer was uncomfortable for the participants. I decided to keep my role as “observer as participant” (Gold, as cited in Bryman 2004: 442), but implemented a subtle change to my role during many rehearsals and performances where my role shifted to that of “participant as observer” (*ibid.*). This enabled me to observe as a researcher-performer and allowed me to participate in activities. Recordings of brass band musical performances were made and transcribed.

As the approach of the research was quasi-ethnographic, imperative throughout were relationships between me and the participants. I considered matters associated with access and rapport imperative and deemed it vital that those involved were committed to the research process. Before collecting the data, I met with several band owners and groups. During the first meeting, I explained in detail the nature and purpose of the research and the impending research activities, walked the participants through the informed consent form and obtained their signatures. I also asked for permission to record rehearsals and performances. Findings from this research were shared with the participants and several members of the community for the purpose of verification.

Now turning to the intent of this paper. This paper provides a background on local brass band research in Ghana by putting fragments of information on brass bands in Ghana together, tracing the history of this musical world, and by exploring the diverse ways military and missionary activities have shaped the musical activities of brass bands.

I continue by discussing the distribution and band formations across Ghana, viewing it in five sections that detail different types of brass bands. I describe the beginning, development, inner workings and localisation of European military music into a range of local popular cultural expressions and provide an account of amateur brass band music as observed in Ghana today. A detailed account of the captivating history of early European contact is beyond the scope of this research, but a brief mention of several critical moments may be useful to understanding the purpose and significance of this paper.

The questions of acculturation and indigenisation in Ghana

At this point, I define key concepts that shaped my thought, and most importantly, ones that demonstrate the extent to which these concepts of culture contact emanate from particular epistemological foundations. These foundations may be reconfigured according to specific socio-political contexts. During the early years of the twentieth century, new heterogeneous populations, especially along the coast of West Africa, struggled to respond to the radical departure from traditional modalities of social, economic, and political exchange as colonial trading centers grew (Rumbolz 2000). One response to the new social order of the time was the creation of the brass band style that utilised both indigenous and non-indigenous elements in a process one might perceive as acculturation.

Nettl considers the large body of theory that has been propounded upon the notions of acculturation as based on clearly questionable hypotheses such as the general uninventiveness of humans, the separability of musical elements in actual practice, and the notion that one can measure degrees of musical similarity and difference (Nettl 1996). Wachsmann (1965–1971) has argued against acculturation's implication of "pure" source cultures in his account of extensive intercultural borrowing between indigenous peoples in Africa. Along similar lines Kubik demonstrates numerous examples of pre-colonial "intra-African" borrowing and diffusion of musical and material culture, such as the distribution of instrumental technologies along the Guinea Coast (1990: 315).

A number of ethnomusicologists demonstrated their disagreement over acculturation theory's usefulness to describe processes of musical change (IMS Report 1961). A typical example of the disagreement can be seen in the research on *Beni Ngoma*, an East African competitive dance form that employed brass band practices and military dress. In his research, Ranger avoids the more obvious acculturation narrative and builds a case for Beni as a creative reworking of indigenous forms in direct response to an oppressive situation (1975). This interpretation provides greater insight into the notion that the hapless indigene simply responded to cultural change as a by-product of change. In a similar observation of agency and the fluidity of cultural symbols, Waterman concludes that one can see "popular music as a means of making history – not only as a form of social action directed at realising a future, but also as a medium for the retrospective definition of tradition" (1990: 369). Erlmann adds to the critique of acculturative and syncretic formulae: "the central problem for the ethnomusicologist dealing with the communal bases of performance can no longer be the isolation of

communities, nations, or ethnic groups with procrustean boundaries” (1991: 16). In this scenario one may observe that change in tradition is inevitable, except that in the case of Ghana it follows as a result of an oppressive encounter.

Reinterpretation of style, as proposed by Apter, may be applicable to the continuity of bands. Reinterpretation may occur when the resemblance between cultural elements is too weak to afford a fully syncretic relationship but is strong enough to allow a reinterpretation of the new by the old (1991: 240). Brass bands found in Ghana, in this formulation, can be seen more as a versatile container than as the flowering of a distinctly new cultural form. However, the same cannot be said about the military, service and school bands since they still maintain the performance culture of the former colonial masters.

Writing of bands under British rule in India, Booth describes processes of “indigenisation” as native attempts to “refashion” external cultural influences in ways that fit their own patterns of social organisation and suit regional cultural needs” (1996: 61). “Refashioning external cultural influences” may be an accurate way to describe similar activities among Ghanaian local brass bands; yet, this observation fails to recognise the influence of overwhelming forces present in the colonial context.

In the context of the cultural hegemony of colonial powers, then, reinterpretation or refashioning culture is not a benign process but may employ strategies of accommodation and resistance. However, not all responses to cultural change are subversive. According to Waterman, “values and psychomotor habits guiding musical practices are often subconscious and may prove to be extraordinarily conservative under conditions of social change” (1990: 7). I suspect that the story of the brass band’s introduction to Ghana and its eventual transformation lies dynamically between the poles of individual agency and the continuity of cultural values shifting toward one or the other as the context allows or demands.

Early European contact in the Gold Coast

The early contact with Europeans in the Gold Coast dates back to 1471 with the arrival of the Portuguese merchants and missionaries. Fage (1966: 47) maintains that the Portuguese explorers were the first to arrive in the Gold Coast after their failed attempts to control the Moroccan gold trade. They established an outpost in the Fante town of Edina which the Portuguese called *A Mina* (the mine). They constructed a major fortification in 1482, and by a papal decree were granted exclusive rights to occupy the new-found region. Their withdrawal in 1642 made room for the establishment of French, English, and Danish slave companies. The Europeans’ forts and castles led to the evolution of new trading centers along the Gold Coast. Many of the inhabitants provided diverse services such as working as servants and artisans. European dress, technology, architecture, education, religious practices, social systems, and most importantly, music, influenced these inhabitants. Even though it is impossible to identify a point that might have set the proliferation of brass bands in motion, there is overwhelming evidence that the European military band and missionary activities had a central role in the emergence and development of brass band music across many parts of the world.

Collins (2016), for instance, claims that brass band music in Ghana emerged out of an earlier regimental “native orchestra” the British set up at the Cape Coast castle in the 1830s. The “native orchestra” played western military marches, polkas, quadrilles, and dance music. This assertion was corroborated by Mensah, Rumbolz, Hupkorti and many others who wrote on highlife and band musical traditions in Ghana. However, it was clear that this band did not play local songs (Beecham 1841). The repertoire changed after 1873 when the first of 7 000 soldiers from the English-speaking West Indies were stationed at Cape Coast and the neighbouring Elmina Castle, to help the British in their war (1873–1901) against the Ashanti Kingdom (Aboagye 1999). These West Indian soldiers (see Figure 1) had regimental brass bands and in their spare time, they played early forms of calypsos and other Afro-Caribbean music which, like African music, utilises a call-and-response technique, rhythmic off-beats, and syncopated clave rhythms. Not surprisingly, Afro-Caribbean music resonated well with the local Fante brass band musicians who had obtained their skills from military personnel.



Figure 1. West Indian soldiers at Cape Coast Castle in the 1890s.
Photograph courtesy of the John Collins BAPMAF archive.

Despite the initial phase of merely imitating West Indian soldiers, Ghanaian brass band performers later developed their own distinct *adaha* music. *Adaha* music was considered the earliest form of highlife music performed in Ghana. It was created by blending syncopated march music with Caribbean and local Ghanaian music. *Adaha*, as illustrated in Transcription 1, utilised local melodies and bell rhythms and was played in both syncopated 2/4 and 4/4 times. It used hemiola techniques, in polyrhythmic 6/8 time. In short, Western military music and black Caribbean music were a catalyst for Ghanaian brass band musicians to localise their own music (Collins 2016).

Transcription 1. Adaha rhythms from Cape Coast, Nkafua No.2 brass band.

Transcription by Author.

The development of localised styles of brass playing was not without difficulties. There was an objection to *adaha* and its street parades by the Europeans in 1888. Reverend Kemp, one of the priests at the time, described the sound of fife and drum bands as “tormenting” and warned that allowing Sunday-school processions to be led by them would “ultimately lead to the ballroom, the heathen dance, and other worldly amusements” (Boonzajer-Flaes and Gales 1991: 13). In 1908 the district Commissioner of Cape Coast, A. Foulkes, put a halt to the five local brass bands of the town; Coker’s Brass band, Biney’s Brass band, the Lion Soldiers Band, the Diamond Players, and Magic Band. These band were accused of playing “objectionable native tunes” which led to competitive quarrelling, obstruction of roads, drinking and dancing.

The restrictions imposed by European colonisers and missionaries did not deter the local musicians from performing brass band music. Instead, they spread from the coastal Fante area into southern Ghana, in both urban and rural areas where there was money coming in from the boom in the cocoa industry at the time (Collins 2016). As a result, from the early 1900s up until the 1930s brass bands were the principal popular music ensembles of Ghana. These were eclipsed by elite dance orchestras and a poor-man’s version of *adaha* brass band music known as *konkoma* or *konkomba*.

Band types, sponsorship, and organisation

Among the local brass bands of Ghana, there is a wide range of traditions, each with its own specificities. Each band and band sphere tells its own story; a story with no ending since changes in all of them are ongoing. These changes are a consequence of multiple forces encompassing the social, the musical, the economic, and the political, to name a few. It is difficult to determine the total number of brass bands active in Ghana. The concentration of bands is overwhelmingly in the area of its initial introduction, namely, among the Fante people in the Central and Western regions of Ghana. From there, the distribution of bands spreads out to the Volta, Ashanti, Eastern, Greater Accra, Bono, Ahafo, Oti and thins out as one travels north. The northern region has very few bands due to its relatively underdeveloped economic status compared to other parts of the country and, more importantly, its predominantly Islamic influence. One

way to appreciate the diversity of bands in Ghana is to examine their sponsorship and organisation. The brass bands may be divided into four broad categories: church brass bands; village and town brass bands; service and work-place bands; and school bands. I will also consider a fifth category, which I refer to as *Sharbo* bands.

Church Brass Bands

Christianity began in Ghana with the arrival of the Portuguese traders who were accompanied by Catholic priests. Priests accompanied the other traders from Europe who followed. However, it was in the early nineteenth century that Christianity began to gain a firm footing in Ghana. The Basel Mission started vigorous evangelistic work among the *Ga* (Greater Accra region) and *Twi* (Ashanti region) speaking people in 1828 (Flolu 2004). The Methodists initiated their activities in 1835, concentrating on the Fante-speaking people along the coasts, while the Bremen mission veered into Eweland in 1847. Starting in 1880, and by 1906, Catholic missionaries had covered almost the entire country. Throughout the nineteenth century, the missionaries concentrated on establishing churches and schools in various parts of the country. Although a number of Independent African (Ghanaian) churches were formed earlier in the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic, Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist, Evangelical Presbyterian churches and Presbyterian churches are regarded as pioneers of Christianity in Ghana (Agordoh 1997). The Independent African churches, on the other hand, emerged from the initiatives of individuals who felt dissatisfied with the purely Western approach to worship in the orthodox churches.

Evangelism has greatly contributed to the spread of brass bands in Ghana, allowing mainly orthodox churches to form brass bands of various kinds. Today, church-sponsored bands are perhaps the most pervasive type of band. Methodist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Evangelical Presbyterian and many Pentecostal churches regularly include brass bands for worship along with congregational singing and the occasional choir, which is known as the “singing band.” These bands provide musical support for worship: playing hymns along with the congregation and on occasion, the choir. They also perform during funerals, religious processions, weddings, picnics, special feast days, and holidays such as Easter, Christmas or New Year. Above all, brass bands are indispensable for fund-raising efforts.

Collections in Ghanaian churches are far from the practice of passing a plate around as is common in Western Christian worship, where one’s contribution is based on personal circumstances. In Ghana, a well-designed bowl or any container made of rubber or wood or metal or glass is placed in front of the congregation to which everyone is expected to “dance” in a single file, one by one or in pew lines to make their offerings; sometimes waving their contributions for all to see. And of course, the ability to have the congregation donate generously on such occasions is usually one of the most important functions of the brass band.

There is a great variety of repertoire among Christian churches in Ghana today. This was not the case four or five decades ago. There was a time in the history of Ghana

when indigenous music of any sort was not tolerated in the church. Take the story of Ephraim Amu (considered the father of Ghanaian art music) as an example. He was excommunicated from the Presbyterian Church for delivering the sermon on a Sunday wearing traditional attire and being an advocate for the inclusion of traditional music in the church. According to Ephraim Amu, in reference to the Presbyterian Church, “the attempt to introduce local music into the church was a movement in itself, something that happened because it must happen. When it happened in the late 1920s the minister elders were against it” (Rumbolz 2000: 86). The introduction of indigenous music into Christian worship cannot be attributed to brass bands in particular but the bands play a vital role in its sustenance.

The Catholic Church was the first denomination to adapt traditional music and dance into its worship, a phenomenon the other churches later adopted. Today, most church bands in the Volta region to a large extent do not depend solely on a western repertoire. They have departed from the standard metres, and four-part (SATB) of European hymnody and have adopted indigenous musical styles with their own rhythmic accompaniments. For instance, the St. Peter and Paul, and St. Cecilia Roman Catholic brass bands of Aflao and Ho, all combined *agbadza*, *bɔbɔɔbɔ*, *gabaḍa* and *zigi* drums and rhythms to support their brass band performances (see Transcription 2).

The transcription shows a 2/4 time signature. The staves are: Bell (treble clef), Rattle (treble clef), Snare Drum (treble clef), Bass Drum (treble clef), Large Kpanlogo (treble clef), Medium Kpanlogo (treble clef), and Combo Kpanlogo (treble clef). The music consists of seven measures. The Bell part has a steady eighth-note pattern. The Rattle part has a more complex pattern with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Snare Drum part has a consistent eighth-note pattern. The Bass Drum part has a pattern of eighth notes and rests. The Kpanlogo parts have various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Small numbers 1 through 7 are placed below the measures.

Transcription 2. Basic *bɔbɔɔbɔ* rhythm by the Ho-Dome Roman Catholic Brass Band.
Transcription by Author.

The Salvation Army and Presbyterian Church bands distinguished themselves from other church and town bands in Ghana by their commitment to music literacy. Many Roman Catholic brass bands, on the other hand, embraced more traditional methods of music pedagogy, which is, learning many tunes by rote and not using written music (Boonzajer-Flaes 1999, Hupkorti 2014, Rumbolz 2000). As a result, the repertoire of the Catholic band tends to be more varied than that of the other denominations. As one might expect, those bands that learn music by rote tend to include more opportunities for improvisation. In consonance with the foregoing statement, Boonzajer-Flaes

recounted the experiences of Reverend Father Anthony Bauer SVD, a priest who spent over 52 years in Ghana, as follows:

I wasn't all that fond of African music – it's too repetitive, so I started teaching them to read music. I'd heard that the Ghanaians were crazy about them (indigenous music), and I played the clarinet myself. I don't know if the Protestant missionaries also had bands at that time – we didn't mix with each other. I'd brought a march with me from the USA. Thought it would be a hit. But the first time they played it at a mission station in the bush, no one found it interesting. When they'd finished, they suddenly struck up with their highlife music and everyone started dancing. So I thought to myself, why get so upset, and I let the band go their own way (1999: 54).

Today, charismatic and evangelical churches have made enormous inroads into Ghana by appealing to the youth with rousing Pentecostal melodies which to a large extent has influenced the mainline churches to become more flexible in the selection of repertoire. Professionalism in church bands is not the same as it is in the town and service bands. Church band members do not earn their livelihood from the churches. The only church musicians who are paid are choirmasters, organists and a few instrumentalists of well-to-do churches in the large cities. As it is in Europe and other parts of the world, “legions of young men without a penny to their names used” the brass band music of the “churches as a springboard to a career in entertainment” (Boonzajer-Flaes 1999: 7).

Town and Village Brass Bands

Most Ghanaian towns of over five to six thousand inhabitants in especially the Central, Eastern, Greater Accra, Ashanti, Bono, Ahafo, Volta and several parts of the Oti region have several independent bands. Cape Coast, popularly known for its castles and forts, currently has over ten brass bands. At the end of the 1930s, there was only one brass band left in Cape Coast called the “Otsaba Band.” This band was established in the early 1900s. The band obtained its name from the founder, a former military official known as “Agya Otsaba.” Not a single member of the Otsaba Band is alive. However, most of the town and village brass bands in Cape Coast and its environs are offshoots of the Otsaba Band. The leader of the Nkanfua Number two band, Agya Cosmos, a retired military sergeant in his early 70s, observes as follows:

Azey [a casual way of referring to another male]! The Otsaba band was very famous those days. They were the only band invited to all the big, big programmes like empire-day celebrations, and the welcome dinners for the diplomats. It was every child's dream to play in that band one day. But for me, my parents relocated to Nkanfua to farm so I didn't spend much time in Cape Coast to join them. Fortunately for me, some members of the Otsaba band were invited to start a band at Nkanfua so I joined (Interview 5 June 2018).

Bands with strong affiliations to a town or village are often owned by individuals, as is the case with Swedru, Abura, Pedu, Apewosika, Nkanfua 1 & 2, and Ankaful bands. There are many bands that have emerged as donations from groups/organizations, and political parties. For example, the Brokos Band of Elmina (also known as the Unity brass band) was donated to the town by one of the leading political parties in Ghana known as the National Democratic Congress (NDC). Likewise, independent entrepreneurs may purchase the instruments to provide a band for hire as in the case of the Divine and Adom brass bands of Cape Coast; a chief, or prominent members, and other town

leaders may procure funds to form a band for the purpose of entertainment and the morale of the town (Rumbolz 2000).

According to Quansah, an elderly man of about 96 years of age, the brass band was not the first formation in Cape Coast comprising of western, wind instruments. Quansah vividly recollected the activities of a musical group known as *atwum* (a local variation of fife and drum band). *Atwum* had flutes and local instruments such as a bass drum locally called *bankesi*, a side drum, an *akonkon* (also referred to as “*pati*” by the people of Winneba), *afrikyiwa* (castanet), *dawurnta* (twin bell), a conga locally known as *tomtom*, and a small cymbal locally known as *kyenkyen*. This band played *adaha*, *atwum* and other local music forms long before the emergence of local brass bands. Quansah recounted nostalgically:

I witnessed everything with my own eyes. Filly! Filly! (A local way of emphasising the truth). I was just a child when I saw older men playing an ensemble they called *atwum* and I grew up learning to play some of the instruments and performing with my younger brother, Kojo Kweno, who played the *akonkon* (Interview 27 December 2018).

Atwum was not only a wind ensemble that raised public morale and entertain but also a kind of competition where instrumentalists wrestle among themselves using their feet while playing their instruments. Hence the name *atwum*, which means “to stretch something.” However, the *atwum* groups gradually died out as a result of the insurgence of brass bands. With the exception of the wrestling games, the brass bands adopted the activities of the *atwum* bands. Today brass bands in the central and western regions play a localised brass band genre called *atwum*, blues (similar to *agbadza* style), marching, *adaha*, slow-medium-fast highlife, popular local gospel tunes and many more. *Atwum*, when performed during fancy dress processions, signals the masqueraders to show their strength through fast, vigorous dancing. Figure 2 is a photograph of an *atwum* ensemble found in Agona Nyankurom.



Figure 2. A variation of an Atwum ensemble found in Agona Nyankurom 1945. Photograph in Rumbolz 2000: 61.

In Ghana, the number of professional musicians that can sustain a family solely on the income provided by music-making is extremely small. Ghana's social structure is difficult to define. Business is conducted at many levels, as exemplified by the micro-economy of hawkers selling "pure water" on the streets of Accra, tiny, rickety kiosks selling one-cedi bags of sugar and other household items, to international businessmen and women in the large cities. Brass bands participate in this highly stratified economy and may accept remuneration not only in the form of money, but also in food or strong drinks. Only a handful of popular urban musicians make a living from music and even fewer achieve success in the international music industry. Among the latter, there are Stonebwoy, Shatta Wale, Sarkodie or Kojo Antwi; gospel artists such as Joyce Blessing and other members of the now-defunct Osibisa band. Brass bands, which exist on the periphery of such an economy, are able to earn only a meager income.

Most brass band musicians worked primarily as *aboboya/pragia* riders (local names for tricycle motor), taxi drivers, farmers or tradesmen (for example, as carpenters, shoe repairers, electricians, vulcanisers, blacksmiths, tailors, or auto mechanics called "fitters", and so on). There are bands with players ranging in ages from 15 to 28, while there are bands such as Nkanfua numbers 1 & 2 and Amosima that are considered as "one of the earliest bands" that have musicians with ages ranging from 46 to above 70. Most of them are elderly farmers with little or no formal education – musical or otherwise – but are still actively involved in playing music. Figure 3 is a photograph of a brass band made up of older musicians.



Figure 3. Nkanfua number 2 Brass Band. Photograph by Author.

Depending on the status of the sponsor and nature of the assignment brass bands in Ghana charge between 250 *cedis* and 1000 *cedis* for performances. Several instrument owners confirmed they increase their prices when a client is a rich man, a company or a national programme (for example, Independence Day parade, political party rally and so on). The usual practice is that the band-owner receives the programme, takes either the full amount or part of the money agreed upon as the cost of the engagement. He then calls the instrumentalists. If the instrumentalists return all the musical instruments without any damage, the band owner takes between twenty and fifty percent of the total amount agreed upon and leaves the rest to the instrumentalists. Band members are paid according to their ability and seniority. Regardless of age, the lead trumpeter and the *akonkon* or *konkon* player will always receive more. For instance, as part of my data collection for this paper, I solicited a performance from one of the bands in the Ashanti region and they asked that I pay them an amount of 270 *cedis* (this amount is far lower than what they usually charge). After the performance, out of curiosity, I asked the bandleader to tell me how he shared the money among the ten members of his band. This was what he said:

Sharing money to these people is not easy. There are always disagreements as to who should receive what. But what we usually do is that some instruments are considered more important than some, so I gave the lead trumpeter and the *akonkon* player 20 *cedis* each and eight *cedis* to each of the remaining eight musicians, and 100 *cedis* to the owner of the band (K. Buah interview 11 December 2018).

Since funeral performances are particularly lengthy, the bands are usually engaged for more than one day which makes their remuneration higher than at one-day programmes. Usually, funerals in Ghana last for about three days (the funeral of a Chief, King or Queen takes about a week of burial rites). It starts on a Friday with the collection of the corpse from the morgue and ends on Sunday with the thanksgiving service. The role of the brass band during the funeral cannot be over-emphasised. The band leads the procession with the body from the morgue to the funeral grounds, performs at the wake-keeping throughout Friday night until Saturday morning, provides several musical interludes during the burial service on Saturday, leads the funeral procession again to the cemetery, and performs during the thanksgiving-service on Sunday. For funerals, it is possible that instrumentalists may even receive small allowances for transportation and refreshments in addition to their main payment. Supplementary tips, publicly given to a player who excites the crowd, are shared among the band and sometimes with the owner. Cash gifts offered to individual musicians in private do not need to be shared with others (A. Atsu interview 19 June 2016).

Currently, the minimum daily wage in Ghana is 10.65 *cedis* (approximately USD 2) per day. The ability to earn more than a week's wages in one or two nights of playing over a weekend appealed to many musicians. The work is not easy as brass bands in Ghana are noted for their very loud timbre and long hours of playing. Ghanaian bands of all types will play for many hours, often without a break. Many of my informants confirmed a potential patron would usually conduct research on how "good" the band is before it is hired. Based on my interview data, the criteria patrons considered before

engaging a band includes: “the band must have a very good trumpeter who is able to play very high notes”, “the *akonkon* player must be very skillful and creative to excite the crowd”, “the band must be able to play for longer hours non-stop”, and, “the band must be able to play very loudly so that people can hear them from very far away and know that something is going on.” The foregoing responses represent patrons’ opinions with regard to aesthetics in brass band performances in Ghana. The final response quoted above also suggests that the services of brass bands were not required only for musical reasons but also for prestige, respect, and publicity.

Due to harsh economic conditions, the acquisition of a full complement of brass band instruments is no easy task for any brass band in Ghana. A modest brass band set might include one or two trumpets (costing between 400–600 *cedis*), two or three trombones and a euphonium (600–1200 *cedis*), a tuba popularly known as “bass” (2000 *cedis* and above), a locally made western-style bass drum called *bankesi*, *kyenkyen*, a side drum, and *akonkon* (a side drum-like instrument without the use of a series of stiff wires held under tension against the lower side). One may also see a conga during sitting down or concert-like performances (see Figure 4). However, due to the new roles brass bands have as leaders of processions and parades, congas are the last instruments to consider when purchasing brass band instruments.



Figure 4. Core set of local brass band percussion instruments (*Bankesi* and *konkon* on the left, side drum in the middle, and *kyenkyen* on the right). Photographs by Author.

Rural town and village bands often utilise very poor quality, older instruments (see Figure 5) that in some cases may have limited functionality. It is common to find instruments with faulty valves, smelling of kerosene (commonly used as an alternative to valve oil), badly dented and even patched with soap or “do-it-yourself soldering jobs” (Rumbolz 2000: 96).

It is unfortunate that issues with regard to bands as male-only expressive forms, as expressed by Bruinders (2017) among Christmas Bands in the Western Cape, South Africa, and Dordzro (2015, 2017), on school bands in Ghana, are even stronger among Ghanaian



Figure 5. The last remnants of the Philarmoah Band in 1992. Photograph by Robert Boonzajer-Flaes.

town and village bands. Despite the extended presence of brass instruments in Ghana, persistent misconceptions still indicate their enduring “foreignness” within Ghanaian culture. Many Ghanaians believe that brass playing can be deleterious to one’s health (Dordzro 2017). More specifically, some believe that women who play brass instruments may develop problems with their reproductive system, as this notion was tied to the effort of blowing brass instruments. The perceived connection between wind capacity and the reproductive organs of women generated the belief that women could become sterile or miscarry as a result of playing brass instruments. To the best of my knowledge, similar concerns do not exist for women who play traditional wind instruments such as *mmenson*, *atenteben* or *wia*. Reasons for the absence of female brass band musicians actively involved in village, town or community bands is a topic for another occasion.

Security Forces and Service Brass Bands

The Ghanaian security forces bands, as well as other public service bands (police, fire service, prisons, immigration, customs excise and preventive service CEPS) are the most organised bands in Ghana. They train daily and play a full complement of symphonic band music. These bands, while not technically brass bands (in that they employ woodwind instruments), often have a core group of brass players that plays for parties and processions to raise their income. Service band members enjoy the greatest access to instruments because with the military, police, fire-service, immigration, prisons and customs divisions, band members usually live in a barracks which is in close proximity

to rehearsal grounds. This more controlled setting, paired with band members' personal commitment to their service affiliation, as well as the punitive deterrents within the military framework, affords greater flexibility for the bands. Musicians rehearse daily and may even keep instruments in their quarters. Instruments are often in better condition, and when band members are not drilling, they can practice, or even explore instruments outside their specialisation (Hukporti 1993).²

Brass Band Music in Schools

On Friday afternoons at the University of Cape Coast sports field, one can hear trumpets and trombones in the distance and a steady cadence of drums from across the University of Cape Coast campus. The members of the University of Cape Coast Basic School Brass Band and the School Cadet Corps practice field formations and military drill repertory for their upcoming speech and prize-giving day that has become a hallmark of most educational institutions across Ghana. Schools, and college events are opened with a welcome parade for special guests. School brass bands provide an altogether different ritual of welcoming. In most cases, these are for the president of the Republic of Ghana, his deputy, the education minister or a representative of the president of Ghana. Elsewhere around the world similar sounds are iconic of musical and social activities of educational institutions: for example, school marching band competitions, pre-game and half-time shows during school sports events (Reilly and Brucher 2013).

Musical activities of bands are regarded as a positive element in school life and an integral part of assemblies, and other corporate events. There is undoubtedly much enthusiasm for music and the other performing arts in Ghanaian schools. School bands exist mostly in private and mission schools and they perform during end-of-term celebrations, anniversaries and regular events highly valued for both educational and social reasons. Mrs. Georgina Aglobitse, the headteacher of the University of Cape Coast Primary school had this to say:

It is a fact that this children love music and the other performing arts. When I see children playing on trumpets, trombone and all these musical instruments, it gets me so excited. And of course it helps them develop their God-given talents. They become more disciplined going through the drills and they get to have lots of fun playing in the band. This is actually good for the image of my school too. Since we started this school band project we realised that many parents want their wards to come to our school (Interview 25 October 2018).

Despite the popularity and fame the bands bring to their schools, participation in the school band is largely an extra-curricular activity. Therefore, the establishment of a band in a school is the sole prerogative of the Headteacher, the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), proprietors (in the case of private schools), churches (in the case of mission schools), student leaders (in the case of Universities) or benevolent societies. Since school band programmes are not part of the official curricula rehearsals are normally scheduled either early morning at 5a.m. to 7.30a.m. before school, during break period, or after school each day, or even weekends to not interfere with regular academic work.

² For detailed information on security and service bands, see Aboagye (1999) and Hukporti (2014).

The school bands have a collection of musical instruments that may be described as those belonging to a marching band.

Usually, one or two band directors who are deemed experts in wind and percussion instruments instruct school bands. Not all band instructors have a formal music training. There are people who are appointed into such positions based on their musical experience rather than qualification. For example, retired police or military personnel or any individual who has knowledge in this area is called upon to help. In the same way, there are band directors who hold Masters degrees, Bachelor degrees or a Diploma in Music from one of the public universities in Ghana. Others are fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to be sponsored by their schools to take short courses in the area of wind ensemble pedagogy abroad.

Although many students learn to play an instrument prior to entering a school or a school band, students generally begin daily band classes from primary two or three (7–8 years) for basic schools and first or second years in the senior high schools and tertiary institutions. Pupils who had band experience in the basic school choose senior high schools with school bands, and do the same for tertiary institutions, consequently resulting in their continuous participation in school bands. The students in bands that are newly started usually make up a band based upon their classes or grades, which may then be broken up into sections such as trumpeters to one side, and snare drummers to the other, to improve instrument-specific instruction.

Modern day Ghanaian school marching bands consist of various combinations of the following instruments: trumpet, cornet, second trumpet or French horn, tenor trombone, bass trombone, euphonium, tuba, alto saxophone, clarinet, and percussions such as snare drum, bass drum, cymbal and tenor drum. It is difficult to find instruments such as the oboe, flute, and bassoons among the instrumental arrangements of Ghanaian school bands, mostly due to economic factors and occasionally a lack of technical expertise in playing such instruments. Usually, large percussion instruments, sousaphones, and contrabass clarinets and other expensive woodwinds are not common in Ghanaian school bands due to a lack of funds.

The bands in Ghana have dress codes, which are reflective of the security service with whom they are affiliated. For example, the University of Cape Coast Central Band dresses in an army uniform (red and blue-black gabardine dress) on special occasions. Dress requirements for band performances vary greatly from one school to another or even from one band to another in the same school. Expensive items such as marching uniforms are usually owned by the schools. Many school bands may require the purchase of matching t-shirts or polo shirts with the band or school's name for each band member. These are mostly provided by the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in collaboration with the school administrators or donations from old students and benevolent societies.

School bands are organised in an informal fashion with students earning no credits for participation. Up to now, no curriculum for school band has been implemented in Ghana. Consequently, school band directors are left largely on their own when

determining the content of their lessons and rehearsals. Typically, instructional materials consist of fingering and positional charts of the valve and slide instruments but not band method or instruction books.

The repertoire of the bands reflects mostly choral traditions of Ghana, typically consisting of military tunes (slow and quick time marching songs), hymns, patriotic songs and arrangements of existing works such as folk tunes, highlife, contemporary instrumental works by Ghanaian composers and local gospel tunes. School bands attend events such as speech and prize-giving days of various schools, Independence Day parades, weddings, funerals, graduation ceremonies, sports festivals, school worship, school carol services, anniversaries, school fun fair programmes and many other events of both educational and social value.

“Sharbo” Brass Bands

A final category of brass band is what I refer to as “Sharbo” bands. The name denotes a similar phenomenon identified by Rumbolz (2000) as “virtual” bands. As the word suggests, it comes from the word “sharp”, referring to the manner in which the *sharbo* bands are organised. It is difficult to determine the person who first came up with this term but as far as I can recall, it was a popular term often used during the latter part of the 1990s. These bands are random groups that are put together at the spur of the moment to provide music at an event. As the exposure and training of brass players far exceed the availability of instruments, there are many groups that are formed only for special occasions. When needed, *sharbo* bands will rent instruments from a town or church band, or sometimes individual instrumentalists who have their personal instruments will come together with the support of a patron to play at a funeral, wedding, or at a picnic.

The organisation of *sharbo* bands occasionally comes about as a result of conflict between band owners and instrumentalists. Band owners in Ghana are mostly rich and powerful people. The business model of sponsorship can often be an exploitative one (Waterman 1990: 132). Disputes over remuneration and benefits are a common phenomenon. In fact, there were situations when some brass instrumentalists were temporarily suspended after appeals over salary increments did not come to an amicable conclusion. Since most band owners do not depend solely on the bands for their survival, unlike in the case of the musicians who have little but their musicianship with which to bargain, it occasionally reaches the point where band owners intentionally starve the musicians. Circumstances such as this create the room for the aggrieved musicians to organise a *sharbo* band to compete for the limited performance opportunities available with their former employers as a form of retaliation.

One particular event which calls for a *sharbo* band is the death of a brass band musician. On such occasions, musicians show their support and solidarity to their fallen colleague and meet to perform at the funeral without a fee. The same could occur when a musician loses a close family relation (father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, and spouse) or hosting any special event. On many occasions, band owners also benefit from such solidarity from brass band musicians in case the need arises.

Conclusion

It is the case that brass and military bands have transcended their cultural origins. They have had, and will continue to have, a tremendous impact upon musical practices of colonised countries. While they may range from more or less nostalgically remembered relics of former colonial times to clear symbols of present-day oppressive regimes, in Ghana they have become a dynamic part of the present-day soundscape. In this article, I have described the history of brass band and the activities of a musical culture developed from colonialism as it relates to the Ghanaian situation. An attempt was made to bring scholarly attention to cross sections of brass band music traditions from Ghanaian cultures past and present. Some of these have not previously appeared in Ghanaian scholarly writings, while others have received scant or passing attention. However, beyond the obvious contribution to new knowledge that this paper has made, the subject of brass bands also connects to research themes that have broader scholarly appeal in the areas of cultural, anthropological and music studies in a wide range of colonial and post-colonial cultural settings, particularly in West Africa. The discussions in this paper reflected the influence of two significant colonising forces: Western domination and Christian missionisation. On the basis of the published materials presented, straightforward conclusions about the purely musical impact of brass bands on local Ghanaian traditions is premature.

Moving from historical, social interaction and ethnographic learnings to the analytical level, a different set of questions arise. More pertinently: similar phenomena occurred throughout the colonial world, but how different was the Ghanaian situation from Britain at the time? I may venture that the situation was similar. The process was mediated by an ideology that was formulated in the west. From all indications, the brass band was a metaphor for the colonial process itself – a “single foreign bandmaster exerting authority over numerous native bandsmen who were expected to abandon their traditional ways of making music in favour of more ‘civilised’ European ways” (Herbert and Sarkissian 1997: 172). For example in Ghana, “the company slaves, the mulattos, and the African traders [were] trained as artisans, clerks, soldiers and as military musicians. Thus local musicians learned to play in so-called castle bands under European conductors” (Boonzajer-Flaes 1993: 3). As a musical culture born of colonialism and religion, linkages between brass bands in colonised communities and the British working class could be considered both as a mode of disciplining labour in the extractive mining industries, and as a form of working-class solidarity and identity. The disciplining of the working class in Britain paralleled the production of a particular class of colonised subjects in the colony of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century.

An important piece of information that was missing in the available literature was information on *atwum* bands. The *atwum* bands set the stage for the development of local brass bands and subsequently, the more fully-fledged respectable musical genre associated with the rich and powerful in society known as the dance band “highlife.” As I have already pointed out, the more interesting features that occur in the brass band phenomenon and the many channels of influence are not only the replicating

of the sort, but its transformation into forms that have their own rules, aesthetics, identity and the creation of a musical universe peculiar to those who perform in it. Many western elements that have remained are the instruments, costumes, formations, and the march (in the case of Salvation Army and Brigade bands), occasionally some of the commands, songs, and miscellaneous paraphernalia. But melodies, rhythms, texts, arrangements and the sort of occasion that called for a band like this were completely adapted to fit local conditions. Furthermore, the many bands that developed in such diverse ways in formerly colonised countries, such as Ghana, must not be seen only as by-products of the post-colonial experience: they need to be critically studied and understood on a case-by-case basis. This approach is one way of understanding how the process of indigenisation unfolds in many different colonial or colonised contexts. Thus the principal aim of this article.

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