

Redefining Ghanaian Highlife Music in Modern Times

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ABSTRACT: Highlife, Ghana's first and foremost acculturated popular dance music has been overstretched by practitioners and patrons to the extent that, presently, it is almost impossible to identify one distinctive trait in most of the *modern-day* recorded songs categorised as highlife. This paper examines the distinctive character traits of Ghana's highlife music, and also stimulates a discourse towards its redefinition for easy recognition and a better understanding in modern times. Employing document review, audio review, interviews, and descriptive analysis, the paper reveals that the instrumental structure, such as percussion, guitar, bass, and keyboard patterns, is key in categorising highlife songs. The paper, however, argues that categorising modern-day recorded highlife songs based on timeline rhythms and drum patterns alone can be confusing and deceptive. The paper, therefore, concludes that indigenous guitar styles such as the *mainline*, *yaa amponsah*, *dagomba*, *sikiyi*, *kwaw*, *ɔdɔnson* among others should be the chief criterion in recognising and categorising modern-day recorded highlife songs.

KEYWORDS: *Category, Highlife, Modern-day, Recognition, Timeline rhythm, Indigenous guitar styles*

I. INTRODUCTION

Highlife music, one of the oldest African popular music forms originated from the Anglophone West African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. However, the term *highlife* was coined in Ghana around the 1920s (Collins, 1994). Until highlife became a commonly used term, the music existed in some forms such as *adaha*, *konkoma*, *ashiko*, *gome*, *sikiyi*, *osoode*, *ɔdɔnson*, *simpa* among others, as traditional and neo-traditional musical forms. [1] also outlines three distinct forms of highlife prior to the coining of the term, which are the *adaha*, *palm wine guitar*, and *the dance orchestra*. These three distinct forms became the beginning of Western influences on Ghanaian popular music. While the *adaha* was further indigenised into *konkoma*, the palm wine guitar and the dance orchestra later transformed into guitar band and dance band respectively.¹ The circumstance surrounding the use of the term *highlife* poses some challenges to the definition of the music. [2] claims that the dance orchestra, which was the third category of highlife played contemporary Western repertory of dance music alongside highlife music. This style appealed to the elite, and since the dance orchestras performed for the elite, they (dance orchestras) pioneered the background for the term *highlife*. [3] further explains that the less privileged town folks, who congregated outside prestigious black elite clubs in Accra, suddenly began to hear their own local street music being orchestrated by sophisticated bands and gave the name *highlife*. Dick Essilfie Bondzie of Essiebons record label, as quoted in [4] states that:

The dance bands used to play at the European Clubs. Their music has nothing really to do with highlife, but then, people patronise it especially, the elite, so the local folks tagged the music, *Top-life* music [4, p. 13].

Similarly, Kwadwo Donkoh, a highlife composer and producer also points out that:

Some professionals were tagged as the *people of the highlife* such as doctors, lawyers, civil servants, merchants, midwives, etc. when they go for *ball or dance*, after all the waltzes, quick steps, foxtrot, etc. have been performed, they now *zoom* to their local music... The elite who were called the people of the highlife, like the music, therefore, the term *highlife* was born [4, p. 13].

Considering the views above, it appears that the term highlife did not have any relation with the music at the time it was coined. It is also arguable that the music and the audience played a key role in the emergence of the term. However, it is believed that the term highlife was later referred to the guitar and dance bands in its subsequent development. [5] admits the diversity of the stylistic framework of highlife, which he also claims is due to the ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of the West African Sub-region. Highlife music has undergone some transformations right from its beginnings, and did not escape the impact of acculturation from within and outside Africa; however, it remained distinct. Highlife, being Ghana's first and foremost acculturated popular dance music has been overstretched by practitioners and patrons to the extent that, presently, it is almost impossible to identify one distinctive trait in some of the modern-day recorded songs categorised as highlife. Also, it appears that the term *highlife* has become a generic name for any popular music form in Ghana. This is evident in the categorisation of some Ghanaian popular musicians such as Amakye Dede (reggae), Kojo Antwi (reggae/Afro-pop), Daddy Lumba (disco/funk), Nana Tuffour (disco/funk), Rex Omar (Afro-pop) among others as highlife musicians. The above trend tends to devalue the distinctive stylistic features of the music.

The categorisation of songs and artistes at the Vodafone Ghana Music Awards (VGMA) Events² has also added to the above confusion and deception. Making particular reference to the 2018 VGMA, the nominated songs for *Highlife*, *Afro-pop* and to some extent *Dancehall* categories are similar in terms of instrumental structure. The eventual winners of the 2018 VGMA *Highlife Song* and *Artiste* categories raised some concerns among practitioners and patrons with regard to the distinctiveness of highlife music. In an attempt to criticise the VGMA Board for what he claims as *awarding undeserving songs*, Gasmilla, the *Telemo* hitmaker contended that the drum pattern is the chief criterion in determining the genre of a song.³ Similarly, Rex Omar, an Afro-pop artiste and Chairman of the Ghana Music Rights Organisation also expressed his displeasure about how the VGMA Board classifies song genre in the Ghanaian music industry. Rex Omar posited that most of the songs making waves in the Ghanaian music industry currently are highlife, but the organisers of the VGMA have always failed with their categorisation.⁴ Interestingly, Kurl Songx, the winner of *MTN Hit-Maker Season V*,⁵ also registered his displeasure at the turn of events at the 2018 VGMA. Kurl was of the view that the organisers erred in their nominations, in that, his song, *Jennifer Lomotey* should have been nominated in the highlife category, but not Afro-pop.⁶ Furthermore, highlife duo, Wutah, similarly expressed their dissatisfaction when their hit song, *Bronya* (Christmas) did not win any of the highlife categories. Consequently, Afriyie, a member of the group, posited that highlife should be redefined.⁷ Jupiter, a Ghanaian dancehall artiste, also claims that highlife is not Ghanaian music. Jupiter is of the view that highlife is an Asante music, which employs Akan⁸ text and Western instrumentation, and therefore, is not representative enough to be called Ghanaian music.⁹ The above discussions and views suggest there is little or no knowledge of the distinguishing features of highlife music by both practitioners and patrons. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the distinctive character traits of Ghana's highlife music, and also stimulate a discourse towards its redefinition for easy recognition and a better understanding in modern times. It should be noted that for the purpose of this study, *modern times* refer to the period of 1990 to the present.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Quite a number of scholars define highlife as cross-cultural fertilisation of African and Western musical elements. [6], [7], [8], [2], [1], [5], [9] and [10] all support the above definition. [11] in his seminal work on defining highlife music, outlined three schools of thought on which categories of music should be accepted as highlife. The first school of thought, in which Adum-Attah made reference to highlife music greats such as King Bruce, Kwadwo Donkoh, Joe Mensah and Nana Ampadu contended that the two dominant traditional dance music timelines (ostinato rhythmic pattern), *sikiyi* and *gome*¹⁰ should be the basis for defining highlife music.

The second school of thought, which comprises scholars such as J.H. Nketia, Komla Amoaku and highlife great, E.T. Mensah also proposed highlife as a generic term, under which there should be various styles. To this category, highlife music is dynamic; therefore, the two timelines mentioned above should only be viewed in the context of a developmental phase. Consequently, the use of these patterns should not be the rule for determining which type of music should be accepted as highlife. However, the second category was silent on what defines highlife. Similarly, the third school of thought on highlife, in which reference was made to John Collins, a highlife historian, argues that highlife is based on guitar riffs such as *mainline*, *dagomba*, *fireman* and *odonson*, which are played to fixed rhythmic patterns. John Collins, also, contended that the two basic timeline rhythms for highlife should not be a prominent feature in a song to qualify it as highlife, in that, musicians and fans internalise the timeline rhythm, which he referred to as *highlife imagination*. He, however, postulated that in as much as some modern popular music may not have the highlife timeline rhythms prominently featured, once listeners could compensate for the lack of these rhythms by fitting the rhythms into the music, then, such music qualifies to be called highlife.

Adum-Attah, in an attempt to uncover the stylistic integrity of highlife based on the three schools of thought, indeed admitted that the task of defining highlife is an onerous one. He, therefore, defined highlife as a genre made up of African and non-African elements, and based on any of the two ostinato rhythmic patterns

which serve as a timeline to other rhythmic patterns in the music [11]. In as much as highlife is cross-cultural fertilisation of African and non-African musical elements, it, however, sounds confusing and deceptive in modern times considering the above definitions and explanations. This is because quite a number of African, African-American, and Afro-Cuban popular musical forms are as a result of cross-cultural fertilisation. One is tempted to support the above statement with the examples of Congolese *soukous* and *rumba*, Ivorian *mapouka*, Cameroonian *makossa*, Malian *mandingo*, Kenyan *benga beat*, Senegalese *mbalax*, Nigerian *juju* and *Afrobeat*, South African *kwela* and *mbaqanga*, Cuban *rumba* and *salsa*, Trinidadian *calypso* and *soca*, Brazilian *samba* and *bossa nova*, Barbadian *spouge*, Surinamese *kaseko* among others. Moreover, the assumption that highlife should be defined or accepted based on the ostinato rhythmic patterns, whether expressed explicitly or imaginatively is quite misleading in modern times. The reason being that some of the popular music forms mentioned above also employ these same ostinato rhythmic patterns either on the bell, snare drum, rattle, rim or hi-hat.

According to [5] the issue of what constitutes the *original* highlife and its definitive stylistic framework in contemporary times has been uncertain among practitioners and patrons across generational groups and regions. Emielu's assertion confirms the problem of categorising modern recorded highlife songs. [12] also observed the spate with which the Ghanaian highlife music has developed to an unrecognisable bit from its original inspiration, and further concluded that the *golden age* of highlife is gone and its future is uncertain. [13] also affirms the generational conflict between the old and new breed of musicians with regard to highlife. He states, that, "This generational conflict is basically ideological, as each generation grapples with the question of what is 'original' or 'authentic' and what is 'fake' or 'bastardisation' of the 'original'; what is the 'core' and what represents the 'periphery'"¹¹ (Emielu, 2011, p. 375). Emielu supported the above conflict with the evolution of terms such as 'Burger Highlife,' 'Hiplife,' 'Old School Highlife' and 'Gospel Highlife,' which according to him, demarcates generational tastes and preferences in Ghana and Nigeria. In an attempt to resolve the generational conflict, Emielu proposed a generic term *Afro pop* for the various popular music forms in Africa irrespective of the country of origin.

Western popular music forms such as pop, jazz, funk, rock, blues, hip-hop among others have achieved global recognition as independent music genres without a *generic* term. The same can also be said about Latin American and Caribbean popular music forms such as salsa, calypso, rumba, samba, merengue, bossa nova, reggae among others. Why should Africa, with an overwhelming number of popular music forms assume *Afro pop* as a generic term? In as much as the term *Afro pop* is an appealing brand, as opined by Emielu, its acceptance will not only trivialise the significance of the individual African popular music forms but may also compromise their specificities. It is a truism that the rapidly changing trends of highlife have exposed some deficiencies in the above perspectives of the music, which also calls for a redefinition and an explicit distinguishable trait in these modern times.

III. METHODOLOGY

In approaching this study, a descriptive research design was employed. Data was collected through document review, audio review, review of *Highlife Song Category* of past VGMA events, interviews of Ghanaian popular music practitioners and patrons on traditional and social media, and post-VGMA reviews on both print and electronic media. These participants, as well as the documents and the audios, were selected purposefully to provide the needed information for the study. To secure a fundament for descriptive analysis, scholarly works on the subject highlife were reviewed to get the insight into the origin and its stylistic development as a first step. Secondly, the sampled corpus of recorded guitar and dance band highlife classics (audios) from the 1950s to 1970s were reviewed to establish the instrumental structures. The above-mentioned period marks the rise and decline of the two distinct highlife traditions, guitar and dance band, and it is also believed to be the *golden age* of highlife music. Similarly, a corpus of highlife classics from the 1980s to present was also reviewed to observe the changing trends in highlife. Finally, the analytical findings were compared and contrasted with other similar popular music forms to authenticate the distinctive character traits of Ghana's highlife music, and also stimulate a discourse towards a redefinition in modern times.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to [7], the two instrumental traditions of dance and guitar band highlife have thrived to some extent in a parallel mode; but despite their continuous mutual interactions, each has achieved and preserved an identity as an independent structure. While the horns (brass) dominate the dance band, the guitar band, on the other hand, is dominated by guitar. The guitar band and dance band highlife, however, declined in the late 1970s and early 1980s partly due to the influx of African American music such as rock, funk and soul on Ghana's music scene, and also a two-and-half-year night curfew under the military regime.

The period above can be considered as a *watershed* in the history of Ghana's popular music. The two-and-half-year night curfew also led to the exodus of Ghanaian musicians to Nigeria, Europe, USA, and Canada. Ghanaian musicians who migrated to Europe, particularly Germany returned with a new form of music, which

the local populace termed *burger highlife*. Burger highlife as compared to the guitar and dance band highlife is highly computerised, it is *funk* and *disco* in nature, live horns and drums were substituted with synthesisers and drum machine respectively; however, the ostinato rhythmic and guitar patterns were maintained. The above practice reflects in the works of early burger highlife musicians such as George Darko, Lee Duodu, Thomas Frimpong, Pat Thomas among others, who have also played with highlife guitar and dance bands prior to their migration to Europe and America. It should be noted that the synthesis of the ostinato rhythmic and guitar patterns, funk and disco music made burger highlife meaningful and distinct as another form of highlife music, considering the works of early burger highlife musicians. However, the works of subsequent burger highlife musicians such as Daddy Lumba, Nana Acheampong, Ben Brako, Nana Tuffour, Nana Aboagye da Costa, Charles Amoah among others compromised the guitar patterns and to some extent, the ostinato rhythmic patterns (timeline), thereby blurring the distinctiveness of the music in comparison to funk and disco music.¹²

The 1990s also birthed another form of highlife termed *hiplife*. Hiplife is a synthesis of American hip-hop/rap music and highlife. Reggie Rockstone is acclaimed the *godfather* of this style. The emergence of hiplife is partly as a result of the influx of American hip-hop/rap music on the Ghanaian music scene in the early 1990s, and also the lack of live band music role models and music teachers for the Ghanaian youth at the time [17]. It should be noted that earlier works of hiplife musicians such as Reggie Rockstone's (*Tsooboi*), Tic Tac's (*Philomena*), Obrafour's (*Kwame Nkrumah*), Akyeame's (*Asabone*) among others are fundamentally hip-hop, and had nothing to do with highlife. The above-mentioned musicians only sampled hip-hop beats, and then rap over them in Ghanaian local languages (Twi, Ga, Ewe, etc.). Hiplife musicians later gave meaning to the music when they started rapping over sampled highlife instrumentation and subsequently creating their own highlife instrumentals. Reggie Rockstone's (*Keep your eyes on the road*), Tic Tac's (*Mbaa formula*), Obrafour's (*Heavy*), Akyeame's (*M'asan aba*) and Obour's (*Konkontiba*) are five of the many examples of hiplife musicians rapping over highlife instrumentals.¹³ [18] notes the gradual resurgence of the conventional dance band highlife music by bands and artistes such as Western Diamonds, Gold Nuggets, NAKOREX, Marriot International, Ozinzim, Megastar, C.K. Mann, Paapa Yankson and Jewel Ackah in the 1990s. However, this was short-lived due to the capital-intensive nature of running a dance band and also the continuous rise of more computerised music such as *burger highlife*, *hiplife*, *Azonto*, *Twi pop*, *GH rap*¹⁴ among others.

The decline of the guitar and dance band highlife traditions on the Ghanaian popular music scene in the past two decades not only deprives highlife of its distinctiveness but also relegates creativity to the background. The absence of *live musicians* during the modern recording process leaves all the creativity in the hands of the studio programmer, which may hamper the creative expression of the artiste and often leads to replicating instrumental ideas for other artistes.

V. THE PROBLEM OF CATEGORISING MODERN-DAY RECORDED HIGHLIFE SONGS

The Ghana Music Awards (GMA)¹⁵ is arguably the biggest awards event on Ghana's entertainment calendar year. The *Highlife* category (song and artiste), though not the most prestigious award of the event, is the *soul* and *identity* of Ghana's popular music. There have been controversies surrounding the highlife song category since the inception of the awards in 1999. [4] observed that Charles Kojo Fosuh, also known as Daddy Lumba won the *Highlife Song of the Year* with his song, *Aben wo ha* (It is cooked) in 2000. The song in question is based on funk and disco musical styles. However, the selection committee of the event used the term *contemporary highlife* to justify their choice.

There is indeed a problem with regard to the categorisation of recorded highlife songs during awards events in Ghana. More recently, the nominees and the eventual winners of the 2018 VGMA Highlife categories generated some debates among practitioners, pundits, and patrons as to what category of songs should be referred to as *highlife*. The above debate never got settled, and interestingly, the 2019 VGMA, which is the twentieth edition also generated another controversy when the song *My level*, by Shatta Wale,¹⁶ was adjudged the *Highlife Song of the Year*. Soon after the winner was announced, many people took to traditional and social *media space* to question, what is highlife? John Collins, a musicologist and highlife historian describes¹⁷ Shatta Wale's song, *I know my level* as *Afro dancehall* rather than highlife. Rex Omar, a Ghanaian popular musician in disagreement with John Collins, also claims¹⁸ that the song is *authentically* highlife. This is not so surprising because Rex Omar had made a clarion call prior to the event for a redefinition of highlife music, which he argues that everyone has his or her own understanding and interpretation of what constitutes highlife.¹⁹ These two opposing views clearly suggest there is a problem with the categorisation of modern-day recorded highlife songs.

For instance, one may find songs of the same instrumental structure under different genres such as *highlife*, *Afro-pop* and *dancehall*, thereby heightening the confusion, which is evident in the works of some of the modern Ghanaian artistes as shown in the table below.

Table 1.

Name of Artiste	Genre of Music	Songs Title
Kofi Kinaata	Highlife	<i>Susuka, Confession, Time no dey, Single & free, Play, Things Fall Apart</i>
Kidi	Highlife	<i>Ɔdo, Adiepena, Thunder, Say you love me, Badman, Gyal dem sugar</i>
Kwame Eugene	Highlife	<i>Angela, Confusion, Wish me well, Walaahi, Ebe yeyie, Ohemaa</i>
Adina	Afro-pop	<i>Killing me softly, Makoma, Too late, On my way, Coastal vibes, Sika</i>
Ebony	Afro-pop	<i>Sponsor, Poison, Maame hwe, Hustle, Date your father</i>
King Promise	Afro-pop	<i>CCTV, Selfish, Abena, Oh yeah, Tokyo, Bra</i>
Shatta Wale	Dancehall	<i>Taking over, Dancehall king, Dem confuse, Ayoo, My level, Thunder fire</i>
Stonebwoy	Dancehall	<i>Go higher, Mane me, Baafera, Bawasaaba, Pull up, Come from far, Come over, Hero,</i>
Mzvee	Dancehall	<i>Hold me now, Abɔfra, Sing my name, Come and see my 'moda', Rewind</i>

Referring to the table, the instrumental structures of the songs listed under the respective genres by the respective artistes sound similar. It should be noted that these artistes listed in the table above are some of the *top-hits* in the past decade, and also a few of the many examples. The instrumental structure of the above-listed songs comprises drums, keyboard, and bass, which are usually programmed with the help of drum machine, synthesiser, and computer. The songs mostly employ the *gome* timeline rhythm, which is traditional drum music. The timeline rhythm is usually expressed by the bell, snare, rim or hi-hat. The bass drum, also a prominent feature in the songs, keeps a steady rhythm, which emphasises some of the beat areas in common time meter. Notice that one out of about five modern recorded highlife songs in the past five years employs one of the patterns illustrated below.

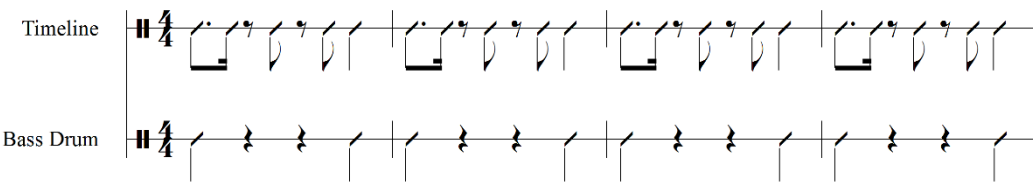


figure 1.

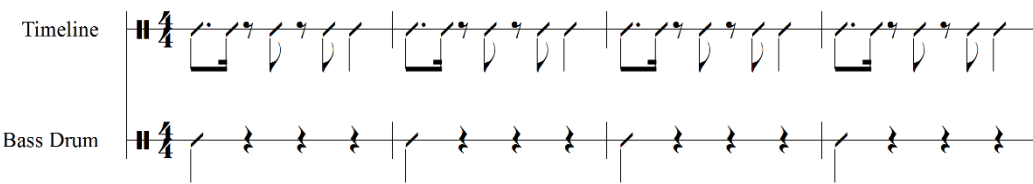


figure 2.

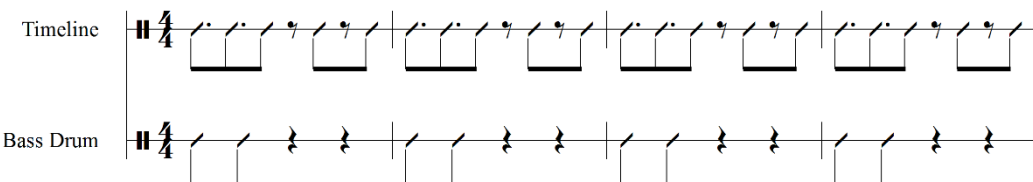


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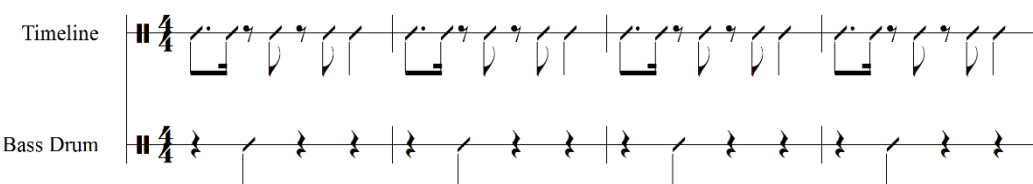


figure 4.

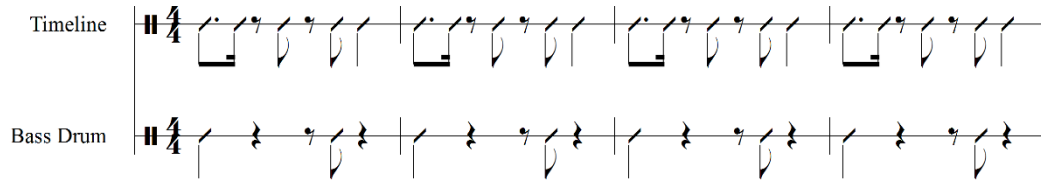


figure 5.

The melodic instruments such as the keyboard and bass do not follow any particular pattern but rather follow the chord progression of the vocal melody. Now, if the above-listed songs sound similar with regard to instrumental structure, why are they categorised under three different genres? Interestingly, Nigerian artistes also refer to these same songs as *Afrobeats*. The impression above suggests that highlife does not have any distinctive trait apart from the above timeline and drum patterns; and, therefore, any song with any of the drum patterns above can be considered highlife.

Kojo Antwi, a Ghanaian Afro-pop musician, stated that he is not comfortable when people term his songs as highlife.²⁰ Kojo Antwi, in defence of his earlier statement unequivocally states: “I’m an African, so I hear *kpanlogo*, *agbadza*, *adowa*, *osoode* and other traditional music tunes, so I try to mix them to get nice tunes...even though you will hear elements of highlife, it’s never highlife.” Kwadwo Antwi’s assertion also gives an impression that although one may sound *highlife* by employing some elements of highlife music, it does not necessarily mean one is playing highlife.

Gyedu-Blay Ambolley, a veteran highlife musician, also lamented that: “We are losing the cultural element in our music that identifies our sound as African and this is negatively affecting the youth of the country.”²¹ Ambolley’s lamentation is quite understandable because the modern-day recorded highlife songs rarely employ any cultural materials.²² Some people may argue that the modern recorded Ghanaian popular songs employ timeline rhythms, which are traditional elements and integral to highlife. Yes, this is inarguably true; however, categorising highlife songs based on the timeline rhythms and drum patterns alone can be confusing and deceptive. As discussed earlier, other popular music forms such as *soukous*, *mapouka*, *juju*, *makossa*, *Afrobeats*, *salsa*, *rumba*, *kaseko*, *mandingo* among others also employ these rhythms either on the bell, snare drum, rattle, rim or hi-hat.

The modern Nigerian *Afrobeats* songs have also been another strong influence on the modern Ghanaian highlife songs for the past decade. Not only have the works of modern Nigerian *Afrobeats* giants such as Davido, Wizkid, Olamide, Tiwa Savage, Yemi Alade among others influenced modern Ghanaian highlife songs in terms of instrumental structure, but also their lingua franca.²³ Sometimes, to differentiate the songs of the above mentioned Nigerian artistes from that of the Ghanaian counterparts listed in the table above is quite a challenge. For instance, Davido’s *Fall & Assurance* and Kidi’s *Odo & Thunder* are two of the many examples of the influence of Nigerian songs on Ghanaian songs. Also, as mentioned earlier, what the Nigerian artistes term as *Afrobeats*, is also termed *highlife*, *Afro-pop* and to some extent *dancehall* by their Ghanaian counterparts. This, however, begs the question: how does Ghana’s highlife music differ from other acculturated popular music forms? To answer the above question, we would have to examine the instrumental structure of highlife music for more distinguishable traits that will help in the categorisation of modern recorded Ghanaian highlife songs.

VI. CONVENTIONAL GHANAIAN HIGHLIFE INSTRUMENTAL STRUCTURE

The instrumental resources of the conventional Ghanaian highlife music can be grouped into four main sections as illustrated in table 2 below.

Table 2.

Percussion	<i>Claves, Bell, Maracas, Castanet, Congas and Drum Set</i>
Strings	<i>Guitar, Bass (electric or acoustic), Seperewa (lute)</i>
Keyboards	<i>Electric Piano, Organ, Synthesizers</i>
Winds/Brass/Horns	<i>Saxophone (alto & tenor), Trumpet and Trombone</i>

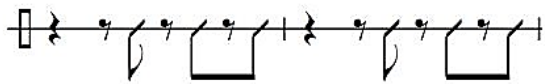
5.1 Percussion

The rhythmic patterns as illustrated in Fig. 6 below are traditional dance music timelines usually played by the bell, claves, and *frikyiwa* (castanet). These timelines are fundamental to all the highlife forms mentioned earlier.

Gome Timeline



Sikiyi Timeline



Gahu Timeline

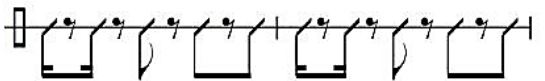


figure 6.

It should be noted that while the *gahu*²⁴ timeline rhythm dominated the *azonto dance* craze in Ghana between 2010 and 2013, the *gome* timeline rhythm is presently dominating the Ghanaian popular music scene. It is common nowadays to hear the timeline rhythms on the snare drum or the rim. Also, the *sikiyi* timeline appears to be the most used rhythm in highlife music, probably because of its relatively less complex structure as compared to *gome* and *gahu* timeline rhythms. The *palm wine guitar* highlife tradition sometimes expresses the *sikiyi* timeline rhythm in a compound duple meter.

The congas and maracas usually play a complementary rhythm to the jazz drum-set and bell respectively. See Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 below.



figure 7.

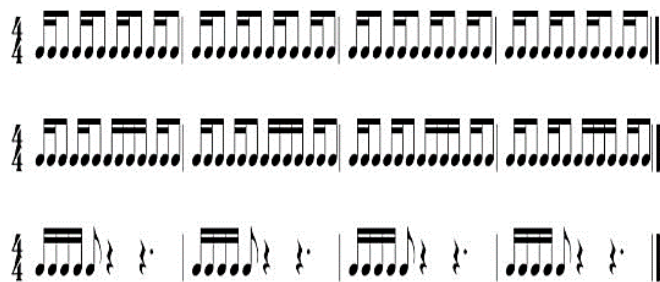


figure 8.

Also, see an example of a full complement of the percussion section as illustrated in Fig. 9 below.

figure 9.

The bass drum, one of the most prominent instrument in the percussion usually emphasises the downbeats of the music. Below, Figure 10 shows some basic bass drum patterns.

figure 10.

5.2 Strings

5.2.1 Guitar Patterns or Styles

The guitar patterns, which combine the techniques of playing the *seperewa* (traditional harp-lute) and the distinctive West African two-finger guitar plucking style is integral to the instrumental structure of highlife music. The Ghanaian coastal musicians were taught the two-finger guitar plucking style by the Liberian Kru²⁵ sailors as [19]–[22] observed. There are quite a number of highlife guitar patterns; however, the discussion will focus on prominent ones such as *Mainline*, *Yaa Amponsah*, *Dagomba*, and *Modal*. It should be noted that these guitar patterns also come with their own variations and sub-styles.

5.2.1.1 Mainline

figure 11.

Mainline, as illustrated in Fig. 11 above is one of the oldest forms of highlife guitar patterns. It is also one of the fundamental highlife guitar patterns, its influence can be traced to Western hymnody. It is quite flexible and progressive than the other guitar patterns with regard to chords structure (for example; I – vii – vi – V – IV – V – I). *Mainline* usually combines *block chords* and the West African two-finger guitar plucking technique.

5.2.1.2 Yaa Amponsah

figure 12.

Yaa Amponsah, as illustrated in Fig. 12 above is also one of the early guitar patterns that evolved from the song *Yaa Amponsah* recorded by the Kumasi Trio (led by Jacob Sam, also known as Kwame Asare, Kow kanta, and Kow Biney) in 1928 [1]. *Yaa Amponsah* is a classic palm wine highlife guitar style, and it is to Ghanaians just as the twelve-bar blues is to the Americans. This guitar style is a melodic-rhythmic pattern that serves as a basic progression that every guitarist must master in order to play most Ghanaian highlife songs. It has also become the lingua franca of highlife music, and almost every guitarist has his/her own version. It should also be noted that the *Yaa Amponsah* guitar pattern is a *straitjacket*, which is restrictive with regard to chords progression, and any vocal melody that does not have the underlying chords progression (I – IV – V – I or I – I⁷ – ii – V – I or I – vi – ii – V – I) cannot employ this guitar pattern.

5.2.1.3 Dagomba

figure 13.

Dagomba, as illustrated in Fig. 13 above is one of the earliest guitar patterns (two-finger cyclical style of playing the guitar). It is less progressive in terms of chords structure as compared to the *Mainline* and *Yaa Amponsah* patterns. It also combines both *broken* and *block* chords with the two finger-picking styles. The chords progression of the *Dagomba* guitar pattern is (I – IV – V – I or IV – V – IV – I or I – V – I).

5.2.1.4 Modal

figure 14

The modal, as illustrated in Fig. 14 above is a generic name for highlife guitar patterns such as *sikiyi*, *kwaw*, *ɔɔnson* and *osoode*. These patterns are mostly employed in the guitar and palmwine highlife bands. The modal patterns usually move or shift between tonal centres, which is an influence from Ghanaian traditional vocal music. The modal patterns employ the following chords progression: (IV – iii) or (ii – iii) or (IV – iii – ii) or (IV – V) or (vi – V).

5.2.2 Bass Guitar

The bass employs the *walking bass* pattern, *funky bass*, and a more syncopated bass pattern, which is termed as *substitution bass* in Ghanaian popular music parlance. The *walking bass* and *funky bass* are influences from swing and funk music respectively. The *substitution bass* pattern, on the other hand, is an appropriation of the technique of playing the *prepresiwa*, a traditional boxlike thumb piano onto the bass. Ralph Karikari, a virtuoso highlife guitarist and bassist is usually considered as the pioneer of this pattern. Fig. 15 below is an illustration of basic bass guitar rhythmic patterns.



figure 15.

5.3 Keyboard

The Keyboard usually employs both block chords and arpeggios. According to [4] even though the keyboard was in use around the 1950s and 1960s, it was not a prominent feature in most highlife songs. The subsequent development of the keyboard pattern, which [18] refers to as *chops*, is highly syncopated and is an influence from *bawa*²⁶ timeline, traditional recreational dance music from the Upper West Region of Ghana as illustrated in Fig. 16 below.

Bawa timeline



Basic chops rhythmic pattern



figure 16.

It should be noted that the instrumental patterns as illustrated above are employed in the composition/performance of highlife songs. Sometimes, these basic patterns can get more sophisticated depending on the composer or performer. In other words, composers/performers tend to vary these basic instrumental patterns so as to create an identity and also enhance the overall output of highlife songs. It is also worth noting that the brass (horns) section was exempted from the discussion, this is due to its prominent introductory, improvisatory and reinforcement role in highlife music, which is also common to other popular music forms.

Considering the instrumental structures above, one can still not make conclusive inferences to distinguish highlife from other genres. As discussed earlier, other popular music forms also employ these same or similar patterns; which is probably due to cultural and musical interactions. That notwithstanding, the guitar pattern is the most distinctive feature in the Ghanaian highlife music. It is also a prominent feature in both the guitar band and dance band highlife traditions. The highlife guitar patterns, which may also be referred to as *indigenous guitar styles* are distinctively Ghanaian as the *seben* guitar pattern of soukous is for Congolese.

VII. CONCLUSION

Ghana's Highlife, being one of the oldest popular music forms in Africa, and also a West African sub-regional music may have influenced some other African popular musical styles and vice versa. Quite a number of scholars, practitioners, and pundits of highlife music have admitted to the problem of definition and categorisation of modern highlife songs. Although a few attempted to define highlife, its rapid changing trends, however, expose the inadequacies in the respective definitions. [7] states that the development of highlife must be seen as a creative selection and integration of cultural materials on the part of Ghanaian musicians in response to a new situation. One such selection was the indigenisation of the guitar. Ghanaians creatively transferred the *seperewa*, a traditional harp-lute playing technique and other indigenous musical forms such as *ɔɔnson*, *osoode*, *sikiyi* among others onto the guitar. Idioms used in highlife guitar patterns such as the call-and-response and rhythmic structures have links with the idioms used in the indigenous music of Ghana. Also, the West African two-finger guitar plucking technique is a prominent feature as [20] informs. It is worth noting that a highlife song cannot be recognised by only the vocal melody. Therefore, for easy recognition, at least, one of the *indigenous guitar styles* discussed should serve as an accompaniment to the song (vocal melody). Interestingly, Paul Simon, an American pop legend, and Richard Bona, a Cameroonian Grammy Award-Winning Bassist, employed the *yaa amponsah* and *dagomba* guitar patterns in their respective songs, *Spirit Voices*, and *Couscous*, which were hailed globally.

It is quite obvious that Ghanaian highlife music has taken a *nose-dive* in recent times, where its distinctiveness is reduced to only the timelines (ostinato rhythmic pattern) and drum patterns, which are also common to other popular music forms. The once prominent *rootsy* guitar patterns, which are uniquely Ghanaian, and based on complex rhythms in African cultures have also been compromised to the extent that the modern-day recorded highlife songs rarely employ them. Ghana's highlife music is presently at a *crossroads*, and one may not be wrong to view the term *highlife* as a generic name for any popular music form in Ghana. As part of the efforts by Ghanaian musicians to promote highlife globally, it is imperative that highlife finds its own space and voice within the broader popular music space with a distinctive trait uncharacteristic of any popular music form. Ideally, there should be some clear delineation to distinguish African popular musical forms with regard to instrumental structure, despite the cross-cultural influences. The closeness of Ghanaian highlife to Congolese soukous and Afro-Cuban music cannot be overemphasised. It is worth noting that both highlife and soukous employ the same drum patterns with respective distinctive guitar patterns, and this is why categorising highlife songs based on timeline and drum patterns alone can be confusing and deceptive. For instance, *Esopi yo*, a song by Awilo Longomba, a Congolese soukous great and *Mansa* by Bisa Kdei, a modern Ghanaian highlife artiste, are similar in instrumentation. However, it is the respective guitar patterns that distinguish the two as soukous and highlife. Soukous has maintained its guitar patterns over the years; however, the highlife guitar patterns are almost non-existent in modern-day recorded highlife songs, thereby losing its distinctiveness among similar African popular music forms.

In a situation where a listener would have to distinguish a modern recorded highlife song from other similar popular music forms, the instrumental structure such as the bell, drums, guitar, bass, and keyboard patterns is key; however, the chief criterion should be the guitar pattern. It is against this background that I define Ghanaian highlife music in modern times as a hybrid genre with a prominent feature of one or more indigenous guitar styles of Ghana.

Notes

¹ See (Collins 1994, 1996, 2001, 2004, 2013, 2018) for more information on the history of highlife music.

² The biggest awards event in Ghana.

³ Abeiku Santana, the host of ATUU programme on UTV, interviews Gasmilla, a Ghanaian highlife artiste known in real life as Milla Odartey Lamptey.

⁴ Dr. Cann interviews Rex Omar on Happy FM.

⁵ One of the television music performance reality shows in Ghana.

⁶ Kwame Dadzie, the host of Citi FM's Celebrity Radar, interviews Kurl's Songx.

⁷ Mzgee, of Joy News, interviews Afriyie of Wutah.

⁸ The largest lingua franca in Ghana.

⁹ Doreen Andoh, the host of Joy FM's Cosmopolitan Mix programme, interviews Jupiter.

¹⁰ Ghanaian traditional dance music.

¹¹ Admittedly, this generational conflict is general in African popular music, and Emielu confirms it in his argument on the subject.

¹² See [14]–[17] for more information on burger highlife.

¹³ See [17] for more information on highlife.

¹⁴ Modern electronic Ghanaian dance music.

¹⁵ Currently known as the Vodafone Ghana Music Awards (VGMA). Vodafone has been the title sponsor of the awards event since 2012.

¹⁶ Ghanaian dancehall artiste.

¹⁷ Israel Laryea interviews John Collins on Joy News Prime.

¹⁸ See <http://ghanaweekend.com/2019/05/22/theres-nothing-dancehall-about-my-level-its-90-highlife-rex-omar-replies-prof-collins/>

¹⁹ <http://www.ghanaiantimes.com.gh/we-need-to-redefine-highlife-music-rex-omar/>

²⁰ Romeo Kofi Debrah, the host of Shaft FM's Drive Time Show, interviews Kojo Antwi.

²¹ Gyedu-Blay Ambolley cited in the Daily Graphic on October 20, 2018 at a public lecture on Creative Arts in Africa's Development: The Case of Music, Film and Photography.

²² The guitar and dance band highlife traditions.

²³ Such as 'jealousy goshe,' 'sherry coco,' and how they pronounce words such as 'mama,' 'thunder,' 'thirty,' 'mother' is apparent.

²⁴ Traditional dance music from the Volta region of Ghana.

²⁵ A tribe in Liberia who are mostly sailors.

²⁶ Traditional dance music from the Upper West region of Ghana.

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