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Life and Music of Elder S.K. Ampiah: An Unknown Nonagenarian Composer

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ABSTRACT: *Elder S.K. Ampiah is a nonagenarian Ghanaian composer who has been composing over the past five decades. Surprisingly, his songs have been popular among the Ghanaian Christian fraternity over the years. However, it appears that some of his songs are presently being credited to others, while some are also being treated as traditional Pentecostal popular-gospel songs with an anonymous composer. This paper attempts to document the life and music of Elder S.K. Ampiah for posterity and also as a contributor to gospel music in Ghana. Data for this paper was collected through interviews and documentary research. This paper consequently reveals that Elder S.K. Ampiah regarded his musicality as a ministry, which he willingly and freely composed for people. Also, because he was uninformed about copyright, some musicians, unfortunately, took advantage of his songs and recorded them without acknowledging him. Thus, making him unpopular and unknown among the Ghanaian Christian fraternity and the public in general. This paper recommends that the life and music of composers similar to Elder S.K. Ampiah should be documented for posterity.*

Keywords: *Anonymous composer, Christians fraternity, Pentecostal popular-gospel songs, Melody, Misrepresentation, Song text*

I. INTRODUCTION

Gospel music according to Atiemo (2006) has assumed an increasingly prominent position in Ghanaian religious and social life since the late 1980s. In an attempt to describe gospel music, Atiemo notes that it is the Christian faith sung in the common style and idioms of the ordinary people; thus, the music of faith set in the commonplace language of the people which does not require much effort to understand. Similarly, Agordoh (2011) posits that "in Ghana, gospel music could be any piece of religious music that is mostly orally transmitted to express either personal or a communal belief regarding Christian life and it serves as an alternative to secular music" (p.129). Agordoh further informs that before the 1980s, the types of gospel music performed in Ghana were mostly anonymous works of people who believed they composed these songs by an encounter they have had (Agordoh, 2011). Considering Agordoh's information, one may infer that Elder S.K. Ampiah is one of the victims of such anonymous composers.

A preliminary investigation about Elder S.K. Ampiah reveals that his songs are performed in Ghanaian churches as *praise* and *worship* over the past five decades. For instance, *Onyame Tumfo* (God Almighty), *ONyame ye Nyame Kese* (God is a great God), *Yesu ne wu* (The death of Jesus), *Metwere Obotan bi* (I lean on a certain rock), *Mmo Yesu* (Well done, Jesus) are five of the many examples of popular gospel songs composed by Elder S.K. Ampiah. He has also composed for several prominent Ghanaian gospel musicians such as Kwasi Mireku, Francis Adjei, Gertrude Oduro, Diana Hopeson, Stella Seal, No Tribe, Soul Winners, Sam Quaye among others. The popularity of his songs arguably transcends the first to fourth generations of Ghanaian art music composers. That notwithstanding, the name *Elder S.K. Ampiah* is almost nonexistent in the Ghanaian gospel music scene and also among the Christian fraternity in general. It is, however, ironic that some of his compositions are being referred to as existing Pentecostal popular-gospel songs, which suggest that the composer is unknown, and in some cases, some of his songs are becoming extinct. It is also quite unfortunate that some of his song texts are being misrepresented. The misrepresentation of his song text usually does not transmit a complete and meaningful message to the listener as observed by Amuah (2012, p. 56). Some Ghanaian scholars, in an attempt to transcribe Pentecostal popular-gospel songs for voice and piano instructions at the various educational levels in Ghana, featured and misrepresented the text and melody of some of Elder S.K. Ampiah's songs and credited them to an unknown composer. For instance, while Mereku (2013) misrepresented the text of Elder Ampiah's song, *Yesu ne wu* (The death of Jesus), Amuah et al. (2015) also misrepresented the melody of *Mmo Yesu* (Well done, Jesus). Coffie (2019) posits that art music and composers

have received a considerable level of attention in Ghanaian scholarship. Nayo (1973), Agawu (1996, 2003), Dor (1992, 2005) and Amuah (2012, 2013) are a few of the many examples of studies on art music composers. Similarly, highlife music composers are gradually gaining attention in Ghanaian scholarship but that cannot be said about gospel music composers. It is also worth noting that quite recently, there has been an attempt to interview Elder S.K. Ampiah by some Ghanaian media practitioners such as Kwaku Sintim Misa (KSM) in 2015 and Citi TV in 2020. However, these media interviews of Elder S.K. Ampiah are usually superficial because of the time constraint and also do not delve into his life and music. Given the above, an attempt to document the life and music of Elder S.K. Ampiah for posterity and also as a contributor to gospel music in Ghana through interviews from the man himself is very appropriate. Elder S.K. Ampiah has composed over 200 gospel songs; however, only ten of his popular songs were sampled randomly and transcribed for this study.

The Early Life and Education of Elder S.K. Ampiah

Samuel Kofi Ampiah, affectionately called Elder S.K. Ampiah was born on April 10, 1925, at Dunkwa-on-Offin in the Central Region of Ghana to Mr. J.E Ampiah and Madam Afuah Ansong both of blessed memory. He was enrolled at Dunkwa Methodist primary school at age 8 in 1933. When he reached standard three, his father became sick, which truncated his education for some time. In 1938, his father received divine healing at a prayer meeting by The Apostolic Church and subsequently joined the church with his family. A year later, the young S.K. Ampiah continued his education at Tarkwa Methodist School in the Western Region. At the Tarkwa Methodist School, he was selected to join the school band due to his interest, and exceptional talent in music. At age 13, his musical talent was manifested as he played the clarinet in the school band, which also sets as the background to his future musical exploits. S.K. Ampiah completed school and obtained the standard seven leaving certificate in 1942.

Elder S.K. Ampiah's Work and Ministry

After his elementary education, he spent some years at Tarkwa before leaving to Kumasi to find employment, which he first worked at the Shell Ghana limited in 1950. In Kumasi, he continued to worship with The Apostolic Church at Ash-Town, where he met some seasoned men of God who eventually mentored him in his Christian faith. Notable among them were Pastor James McKeon, Pastor Copp, Pastor Anaman, Pastor Seaborne and many others who are of blessed memory.

In 1955, he resigned from Shell Ghana Limited and joined the International Bakery in Accra. Due to a split of The Apostolic Church in Accra, S.K. Ampiah initially had to travel from Accra to either Winneba or Apam in the Central Region just to attend church services on Sundays. He later started fellowshipping at the Korle-Gonno branch of The Apostolic Church in Accra after the split issues were resolved.

In 1958, S.K. Ampiah was ordained as an *Elder* in The Apostolic Church by Pastor Pridy from the United Kingdom. This explains why he is called *Elder S.K. Ampiah*. Given the working conditions at the International Bakery, which used to interrupt his church activities, he was advised by Elder E.H. Danquah to resign, and take up an appointment in his company, Unity Trading Stores as a salesman, which he gladly accepted. It is worth noting that, Elder S.K. Ampiah was a member of the Building Committee, which constructed the Headquarters of The Apostolic Church in Accra, Ghana. He also played the clarinet and saxophone with his late brother Apostle James Ampiah of the Church of Pentecost at conventions and crusades, which won more souls for Christ and the church.

Elder S.K. Ampiah's Early Music Life

As mentioned earlier, his musicality emerged from his elementary school days when he was selected to join the school band at Tarkwa Methodist School in the Western Region. According to him, the Headmaster of the school encouraged him to learn how to play the clarinet, which he later became the best clarinet and saxophone player in the school. Due to his exceptional performance, he used to perform at functions in and out of his community. He narrated: "I was very humble and calm which took me to my dreams...I practice my instrument the little chance I get".

He was the first person to play the clarinet in The Apostolic Church of Ghana. He trained a lot of people who were interested in learning the instrument and through that many people have become popular. Elder S.K. Ampiah was later appointed as the Music Director for the Apostolic Church due to his musical prowess and commitment to the church's activities.

Elder S.K. Ampiah's Musical Exploits

As a Music Director in The Apostolic Church, Elder S.K. Ampiah's role was to coordinate musical activities in the church, especially during conventions and crusades. Before any church convention, he is usually given the theme to compose songs for congregational singing. He narrates: "I pray to God to fill me with the *Holy Spirit* to compose". He will then go to sleep and by the time he is awake, he hears melodies running through his mind, which he then writes in tonic sol-fa in a book. He writes as many songs as he can for the church to choose one for the convention. He narrates: "I never composed without the directions of the *Holy Spirit*". In other words, the *Holy Spirit* inspired him to write all his songs. He composed for Men's Convention, Women's Convention, Youth People's Convention, Christmas Convention, Easter Convention, and many more,

which he still composes now. He has composed songs for the 50th, 75th and 80th-anniversary celebrations of The Apostolic Church, Ghana. He also sometimes composes for the Church of Pentecost during their Camp Meetings. He admits that God through him has written over 200 songs for church conventions, which are played on the airwaves very often, and also sung in most of the churches in Ghana. For instance, *Awurade ne mehwefo* (The Lord is my shepherd) was taught at the Women's Convention in Obuasi, *Onyame Tumfo* (God Almighty) in Koforidua, *Se Yesu Kristo Kasa* (When Jesus Christ speaks) in Oda, are three of the many examples. His music ministry took him to Nigeria and Penygroes in the United Kingdom respectively in 1965 and 1976. Ghanaian gospel musicians such as Kwasi Mireku Francis Adjei, Diana Hopeson, Stella Seal, Gertrude Oduro, No Tribe, Soul Winners, Sam Quaye among others have become popular through his compositions. At age 95, Elder S.K. Ampiah is still a 'gallant soldier' and a prolific composer for the Christian fraternity in Ghana.

Some Reasons Why Elder S.K. Ampiah has not been recognised

In as much as money was not the objective for which Elder S.K. Ampiah composed songs for people, almost all the Ghanaian gospel musicians he composed for did not give him anything nor acknowledge him as the composer after they had recorded his songs. He is of the view that his musicality is a ministry and a gift from God, thus, he willing and freely composed to promote the work of God. Also, being a respected Elder in The Apostolic Church, some of the members took advantage of his songs to record whenever he taught them at church conventions; this, however, goes without any credit to him. It is worth noting that, some Ghanaian gospel musicians misrepresent the text and melody of his songs during the recording process. Once it is recorded, churches and radio stations begin to promote the misrepresented text and melody, while relegating the composer's intent to the background. It also appears that The Apostolic Church, Ghana did not do much to celebrate such a music icon despite his continued loyalty and meritorious service to the church. According to him, the church could have put up a programme to outdoor and celebrate his compositions. This, however, would have informed the entire church and guests about his compositions, since most of his songs are performed in almost every church in Ghana.

Selected Songs of Elder S.K. Ampiah

Onyame Yɛ Nyame Kɛse (God is a great God)

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Musical notation for the song 'Onyame Yɛ Nyame Kɛse'. The notation is in G major (one flat) and 4/4 time. It consists of two staves. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The melody is: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4-A4 (half), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (half). The second staff starts with a measure rest of 7, then continues with: D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter), G3 (quarter), F3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), D3 (quarter), C3 (half). Lyrics are written below the notes.

O - nya-me yɛ Nyame ke se se wo twere noa w'a
nim ren-gua-se da O - nya-me yɛ Nyame ke se

Text

Onyame yɛ Nyame kɛse
Sɛ wo twere noa, w'anɔm renguase da
Onyame yɛ Nyame kɛse

English Translation

God is a great God
If you lean on Him, you'll never be put to shame
God is a great God

Jewfo Wɔn Hen (King of the Jews)

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Musical notation for the song 'Jewfo Wɔn Hen'. The notation is in G major (one flat) and 2/4 time. It consists of two staves. The first staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The melody is: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4-A4 (half), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (half). The second staff starts with a measure rest of 9, then continues with: D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter), G3 (quarter), F3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), D3 (quarter), C3 (half). Lyrics are written below the notes.

mo'n bra'n be hwe No ɔ yɛ Ye - su Ye-su Kris-to de ɔ y'ɔ sa - Hen
mo'n bra'n be hwe No Jew - fo wɔn Hen Ne din ne Ye - su ɔ -y'ɔ sa - Hen

Text

*Mon bra nbehwe No, ɔye Yesu
Yesu Kristo de ɔy'ɔsahen
Mon bra nbehwe No, Jewfo wɔn Hen
Ne din ne Yesu, ɔy'ɔsahen*

English Translation

Come and see Him, He's Jesus
As for Jesus Christ, He's a Mighty Warrior
Come and see Him, King of the Jews
His name is Jesus, He's a Mighty Warrior

**Yesu Mmo
(Well done, Jesus)**

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Mo-mma ye ma Ye-su mmo na w'a yea de ke sea ma yen ode ne mo-gya to yen
7 w'a ma ye nya nkwa nnie - wie mon ma ye ma Ye - su mo na w'a yea de ke sea ma
12 yen mmo Ye - su mmo mmo Ye - su mmo
17 mmo Ye - su mmo Ye - su ye ma Wo mo

Text

*Momma ye ma Yesu mmo, na w'aye ade kese ama yen
Ode ne mogya to yen, w'ama ye nya nkwa
enniewie
Momma ye ma Yesu mmo, na w'aye ade kese ama yen
Mmo Yesu mmo, mmo Yesu mmo
Mmo Yesu mo, Yesu ye ma Wo mmo*

English Translation

Let's appreciated Jesus, for He has done great things for us
He has bought us with His blood, He has given us eternal life
Let's appreciate Jesus, for He has done great things for us
Well done, Jesus, well done, Jesus
Well done, Jesus, Jesus we appreciate You

**Onyame Tumfo
(God Almighty)**

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

O - nya-me Tum - fo ye be yi Wo din n'a ye Wo nnwu-ma pa no'n ti
7 ye be yi W'a ye o - wu mu en - kwa - a mu ye be yi Wo
12 din n'a ye Wo nnwu-ma pa no'n nti ye be yi W'a ye

Text

Onyame Tumfo, yebe yi Wo din n'aye
Wo nwoma pa no nti, yebe yi W'aye
Owu mu enkwa mu, yebe yi Wo din a'ye
Wo nwoma pa no nti, yebe yi W'aye

English Translation

God Almighty, we'll praise Your name
 Because of Your good works, we'll praise You
 In death or life, we'll praise Your name
 Because of your good works, we'll praise You

Yesu Ne Wu (The death of Jesus)

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Ye-su ne wu no na wa-ma me nya nkwa ne pe-ra kro mu na me-nya m'a ya-re sa
 9
 ne mo-gya no na wa ho-hro me bə ne Ye-su ne wu n'a gye me kraa me de me ma wommo
 17
 mmo mmo mmo mmo mmo mmo mmo mmo mmo mmo mmo Ye-su Kris-to mmo me de me ma wommo

Text

Yesu ne wu no na wama menya nkwa
Ne pera kro mu na me nya m'ayare sa
Ne Mogya no na wa hohro me bəne
Yesu ne wu n'agye me kraa, mede me ma wo mmo
 Mmo mmo mmo, mmo mmo mmo mmo, Yesus Kristo
 mmo, mede me ma wo mmo

English Translation

The death of Jesus has given me life
 By His stripes I'm healed
 His blood has washed my sins
 The death of Jesus has saved me forever, as for me, I
 say well done
 Well done, well done, well done, well done, well
 done, well done, well done, Jesus Christ, well done,
 as for me, I say well done

Onyame Ye (God is Good)

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Se ne'O nyan-ko-pə̀n də wia - se ni se ɔ-de ne-də ba kro no mai se o bi-a-ra ə-be
 6
 gye no'a di -No w'an-ye-ra na wa nya daa nkwa O - nya - me ye sa n'O-nya
 12
 me ye A - dom Nya - me ye O - ye ma me

Text

Se nea Onyankpɔ̀n də wiase ni
Se ɔde ne dəba kro no mai
Se obiara əbe gye no adi no w'anyera na wanya daa
nkwa
Onyame ye, sana Onyame
Adom Nyame ye, oye ma me

English Translation

For God so loved the world
 So He gave His only begotten Son
 That whoever believes in Him should not perish but
 have eternal life
 God is good, indeed God is good
 Gracious God is good, He's good to me

Yesu Y'ohen (Jesus is King)

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Ye - su y'ohen o - y'A hen mu hen am - pa

9 Ye - su y'ohen o - y'A hen mu hen am - pa n'a

17 hen - di fi - so - ro n'a hen - di fa - ta no

25 Ye - su y'ohen o - y'A hen mu hen am - pa

Text

*Yesu y'ohen, oy'Ahen mu Hen ampa
Yesu y'ohen, oy'Ahen mu Hen ampa
N' ahendi fi soro, n' ahendi fata no*

Yesu y'ohen, oy'Ahen mu Hen ampa

English Translation

Jesus is King, indeed He's the King of Kings
Jesus is King, indeed He's the King of Kings
His Kingdom is from above, He's worthy of His
Kingdom

Jesus is King, indeed He's the King of Kings

Wa Pepa Me Bone (He's Washed My Sins)

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Ne wu n'a ye me'n-fa so _____ Ne wu n'a ye me'n fa so Ye-su ne wu na

11 ye me'n fa so w'a pe - pa me bo ne nyi naa w'a ma me hu ne'n kwa gye

Text

*Ne wu n'aye me nfaso,
Ne wu n'aye me nfaso
Yesu ne wu n'aye me nfaso
W'apepa me bone nyinaa
W'ama mehu ne nkwa gye*

English Translation

I'm a beneficiary of His death
I'm a beneficiary of His death
I'm a beneficiary of Jesus' death
He has washed all my sins
He has made me seen His salvation

M'agyenkwa Pa (My Saviour)

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Me de w'a - ye - yi re-bre wo m'a-gyen-kwa pa m'a gyen-kwa pa w'an hwe me

10
bo - ne ne me e'n - di w'a-ma a - de - kye p'a to - me Me de w'a-

18
ye - yi re - bre wo m'a-gyen-kwa pa m'a gyen - kwa pa

Text

*Mede W'ayeyi rebre wo
M'agyenkwa pa, m'agyenkwa pa
W'anhwe bone ne me endi
W'ama adekye p'ato me
Mede W'ayeyi rebre wo
M'agyenkwa pa, m'agyenkwa pa*

English Translation

I bring You praise
My Saviour, my Saviour
You did not deal with me according to my sins
You have given me a new day
I bring You praise
My Savior, my Saviour

Wo Nnwuma Nyinaa Da W'ase (All Your Creations Thank You)

Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Wo nnwu-ma nyi-naa-ra da-w'a - se A - sa - fo Ye - ho - wa Wo-din mu na

6
ye di'n - ku nim A - sa - fo Ye - ho - wa

Text

*Wo nnuma nyinaara da w'ase, Asafo Yehowa
Wo din mu na ye di nkunim, Asafo Yehowa*

English Translation

All Your creations thank You, Mighty God
We're victorious in Your name, Mighty God

II. CONCLUSION

It is a truism that the songs of Elder S.K. Ampiah, a nonagenarian Ghanaian gospel music composer are presently being used in all forms of Christian worship in Ghana and abroad. It is quite obvious that both the *young* and *old* generations have little or no knowledge about him as the composer of the popular gospel songs they perform in their churches. Several Ghanaian gospel musicians have recorded and released his songs and have become popular without acknowledging him as the composer, probably due to his lack of knowledge in copyright. This, however, has made him unpopular and unknown among the Ghanaian Christian fraternity and the public in general. I, therefore, recommend that the life and music of composers similar to Elder S.K. Ampiah should be documented for posterity.

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