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

### Mark Millas Coffie

Department of Music Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

**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 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

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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 Dunkwaon-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,

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which he still composes now. He has composed songs for the  $50^{\text{th}}$ ,  $75^{\text{th}}$  and  $80^{\text{th}}$ -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.

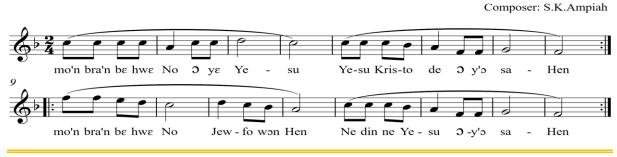
Selected Songs of Elder S.K. Ampiah



Onyame  $y \varepsilon$  Nyame  $k \varepsilon se$ 

God is a great God

## Jewfo Won Hen (King of the Jews)



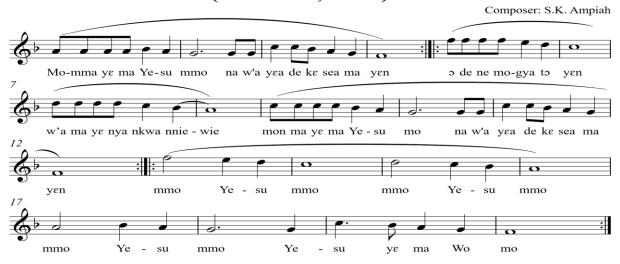
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Text Mon bra nbɛhwɛ No, ɔyɛ Yesu Yesu Kristo de ɔy'ɔsahen Mon bra nbɛhwɛ No, Jewfo wɔn Hen Ne din ne Yesu, ɔy'ɔsahen **English Translation** Come and see Him, He's Jesus As for Jesus Christ, He's a Mighty Warrior Come and see Him, King of the Jews His name is Jesus, He's a Mighty Warrior

# Yesu Mmo (Well done, Jesus)



Text

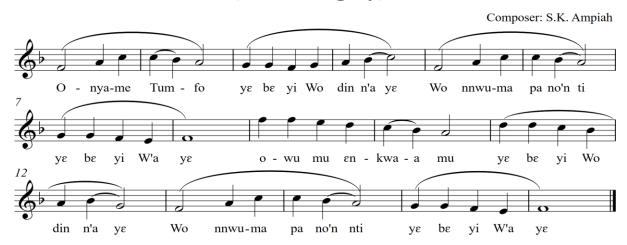
Momma ye ma Yesu mmo, na w'aye ade kese ama yen

Ode ne mogya tɔ yɛn, w'ama ye nya nkwa enniewie Momma yɛ ma Yesu mmo, na w'ayɛ ade kɛse ama yɛn

> Mmo Yesu mmo, mmo Yesu mmo Mmo Yesu mo, Yesu ує 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)

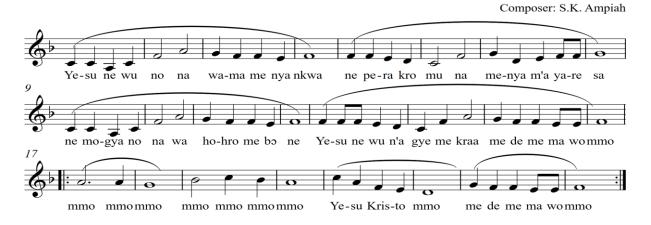


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#### Text

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)



### 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 bone Yesu ne wu n'agye me kraa, mede me ma wo mmo

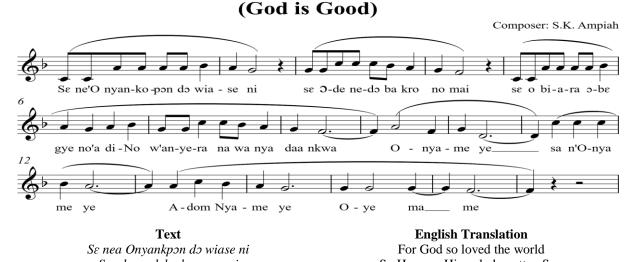
Mmo mmo mmo, mmo mmo mmo, Yesus Kristo mmo, mede me ma wo mmo

#### **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, Jesus Christ, well done,

as for me, I say well done

# Onyame Ye



Se nea Onyankpon do wiase ni Se ode ne doba kro no mai Se obiara obe gye no adi no w'anyera na wanya daa nkwa Onyame ye, sana Onyame Adom Nyame ye, oye ma me 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

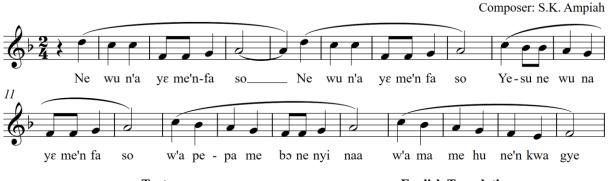
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Yesu Y'əhen (Jesus is King) Composer: S.K. Ampiah Ye su y'Ə -hen o -y'A hen mu hen am ра Ye y'Ə hen ο-y'A n'a su hen mu hen am pa 17 hen - di fi \_ hen di fa \_ n'a ta no so \_ ro 25 0 Ye hen hen mu hen am su y'Ə o-y'A ра

**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 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

Yesu y'əhen, əy'Ahen mu Hen ampa

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



Text Ne wu n'ayɛ me nfaso, Ne wu n'ayɛ me nfaso Yesu ne wu n'ayɛ me nfaso W'apepa me bɔne nyinaa W'ama mehu ne nkwagye

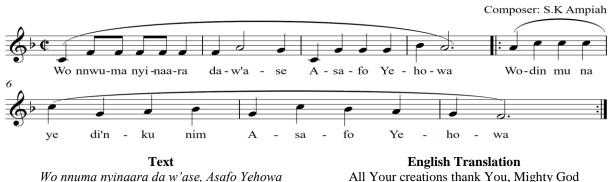
### English Translation

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 w'an hwe me pa ~ 0 me ε'n - di w'a-ma a - de - kye Me de w'abo - ne ne p'a to me 18 - yi brε ye m'a-gyen-kwa re wo m'a gyen - kwa pa pa Text **English Translation** Mede W'ayeyi rebre wo I bring You praise M'agyenkwa pa, m'agyenkwa pa My Saviour, my Saviour W'anhwe bone ne me endi You did not deal with me according to my sins W'ama adekye p'ato me

Mede W'avevi rebre wo M'agyenkwa pa, m'agyenkwa pa 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)



Wo din mu na ye di nkunim, Asafo Yehowa

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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Elder S.K. Ampiah