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FINDING THE LOST FISHERMEN: A STUDY IN RECOVERY AND PERFORMANCE AS PRESERVATION

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This paper engages what strategic/ethical research options can be deployed for preserving, performing, and documenting artworks such as *The Lost Fishermen*, a dying folk opera, which is arguably one of Ghana's most successful musical artworks, created by Saka Acquaye in the immediate aftermath of Ghana's political independence.

Introduction

This presentation explores ethical and strategic performance-based techniques for researching musical arts threatened with extinction. The reference to performance-based techniques in this context implies learning to perform both as the intended research objective as well as a method of gathering data. The idea is to increase the possibility of extending the lives of such art forms and to preserve them through documentation. The approach resolves two paradoxes of humanities research: it bridges the gap between ethnomusicological research and the human performers it studies, and underscores the primacy of the sound, action, embodiment, and performance of musical arts as living objects, not as a work written as a score.[1]

I wish to discuss this issue regarding an ongoing project to recover/revive stage performances of *The Lost Fishermen*, a musical drama composed by Saka Acquaye (1923–2007) in 1965. *The Lost Fishermen* has been classified under the genre "folk opera," created and so titled by Acquaye: one of the best-known all-round artists ever to emerge from Ghana. Records of folk operas already exist in Nigeria,[2] and also among the African-American communities in the USA,[3] and probably earlier in South Africa, hence Acquaye may not be the originator of that designation. He is also on record as the genre's best-known composer with ten known works within the space of two decades. He defined what he meant by folk opera as "a musical form of drama composed of airs, recitatives, and pieces performed by a chorus with orchestra, and which makes use of scenery, acting and a blend of poetry and dance."[4]

According to Acquaye, his intent for resorting to the operatic genre was to exploit the integrated aesthetic values of the indigenous African arts in ways that no singular art form could express. His emphasis on African-centred themes, folk songs, and dances, characterisation, instrumentation, costumes, performance materials (props), as well as performance practices, give some credence to this claim. He said, "I have always thought of the best way to reach the majority of our people. It occurred to me that music, dance and drama were popular with our people and I can point to problems of society and contribute to its development using opera."[5]

Folk operas in Ghana's history

Acquaye's folk operas occupy a special place in Ghana's cultural history, politics, and nation-building efforts. The art form was created in the nationalistic zeal that characterised the immediate aftermath of Ghana's independence from colonial rule in 1957, particularly between the 1960s and 70s. It was a time when uniting the pre-independence disparate ethnicities of the new nation-state and weaning the populace off the colonial cultural baggage of racial/cultural inferiority were topmost priorities on the Kwame Nkrumah-led administration's political agenda. Under his philosophy, "… art as another tool of ideology,"[6] Nkrumah personally inspired a cultural renaissance trajectory that valorised African personality, values and nature-inspired worldviews as a necessary alternative to the colonial legacy. Even though he may have pioneered the way, Nkrumah was not alone. Similar initiatives such as Julius Nyerere's *ujamaa*[7] and Léopold Sédar Senghor's "Negritude,"[8] confirm the pan-African dimensions of that development. Part of the modus operandi was the conservation of African natural resources and cultural elements such as taboos, totems, ethnic names, folklore, and proverbs as imperatives for the development of Africa.[9] In Ghana, the philosophy translated into unparalleled governmental patronage of the arts by the Nkrumah-led administration, in particular. Acquaye's integration of various art forms, deliberately drawn from different ethnic groups in Ghana, was meant to serve as a metaphor to celebrate the much-cherished

African personality as well as foster a sense of national unity and harmony among the national audience.

Out of his many operas, *The Lost Fishermen*, in particular, exemplifies this creative convention. Acquaye based the story on a *Ga* mythology about the sea and the necessity to honour the taboos and rituals associated with it for peaceful coexistence between people and their natural environment. Based on a true-life story, the musical drama narrates the story of how ten fishermen, headed by a chief and his two princes (the principal custodians of their community's culture), desecrated the taboo of the sea by going to fishing on a Tuesday: the day fishing in the sea was forbidden by the Gods. For their punishment, the crew were battered by ravaging storms, which sent them missing on the high seas for weeks. In the end, they had to sacrifice the chief's youngest, beloved son to placate the sea deity before they were able to retrace their way back to their home village. The play's emphasis on African-centred themes, songs and instrumental accompaniment, costume art, and stage effects were all intended as a metaphor for criticising the growing cultural malaise and as a strong case for a return to African beliefs and cultural values.

Acquaye, already well-known for his exploits in music, sculpture, painting, and national athletics, explained his motivation for resorting to operas, "… to integrate our multi-tribal society in terms of its common interests, attitudes and values of various classes. It is to create a basis for the formulation of a common destiny."[10] This African-centred philosophy perhaps explains the reason why Acquaye's folk operas enjoyed a high level of state support both by the Nkrumah-led administration (1957–1966) as well as its protégé, the Frank Acheampong-led military government (1970–1978). It was not only *The Lost Fishermen* that gained prominence in Ghana's fledgeling cultural politics at the time. His first opera, *Obadzen*, toured the Soviet Union in 1961 over a six-month run as an advance cultural party for Nkrumah's first visit to that country. Performed by the *Wulɔmɛi* neo-traditional band, *The Magic Drum* and *Sasabonsam* both toured the USA in 1975. *The Lost Fishermen*, performed by the Damas Choir—arguably the most popular opera of them all—was staged several times in Ghana and also in Lagos, Nigeria, at the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), 1977. In London, *The Lost Fishermen* was staged in 1986 at The George Bernard Shaw Theatre, produced by Luis Mahoney (a British actor). There, the opera was performed by a cast of 12 leading African (international) artists, mostly South Africans, including Nathan Mdledle of the world-famous Manhattan Brothers.[11] The Manhattan Brothers were one of the most popular South African music groups during the 1940s and 50s. Acquaye was invited to London to supervise its direction.[12] Thus, Acquaye's folk operas had transitioned from a personal artistic initiative to a public/national/cultural heritage right from the 1960s when it first appeared on Ghana's arts scene and which continued into the mid-1980s.

The research challenge

The play is now, however, on the verge of disappearing from the music/theatre scene, both locally and internationally. There is virtually no information about folk opera activities beyond the mid-1980s until 2007. When I first visited the home of Acquaye, in August 2002, the composer was already blind, well advanced in age at 79, and inactive. The last time the music drama had been staged was in 1986 in London. In Ghana, it had not been staged in almost 30 years. In their framework for measuring music vitality and endangerment (MVEF), Catherine Grant and Chhuon Sarin argue, among other things, that "change in the number of people engaged with the art form over the past five to ten years, as well as changes in the performance contexts and

functions over the past five to ten years" constitute enough basis for declaring a genre to be in danger of extinction and therefore needing safeguarding intervention.[13] Effectively, therefore, *The Lost Fishermen* opera can be considered extinct by the time I was first introduced to the composer. What factors precipitated the extinction of a very popular art form, which enjoyed enormous state and public support, and how may artistic research intervene to safeguard it from extinction?

The paradox of folk opera's own history

To explain the potential endangerment factors to Ghanaian folk opera tradition, particularly *The Lost Fishermen*, it is proper to begin with the paradox of the genre's own history. As explained earlier, in the exercise of their social function, artists may align their creative works either in support of or in opposition to particular social agendas and, by implication, the political regime responsible. The idea behind the historical paradox argument is that the very circumstantial factors that may advance the public prominence of an art form are also the very factors that can precipitate their endangerment. Thus, *The Lost Fishermen's* fall into a state of disuse can be blamed partly on radical changes in the socio-political environment and related ideology that once sustained its popularity. The general disillusionment that characterised the post-independence African political environment, and which eroded confidence and public support for African political leadership, also had serious implications for the art forms that were created in support of those regimes and their pan-African ideologies.[14]

Jeff Titon's ecological analogy, which relates the behaviour of musical cultures to the behaviour of ecological systems, can provide a useful analytical framework for this endangerment phenomenon.[15] The musical habitat, he explains, includes,

> both physical and cultural factors of the musical environment such as ideas about music, sound and sound-producing instruments, recording studios, media, venues, musical education and transmission, and the economics of music—indeed, music as cultural production and a cultural domain—which relate to the health of musical individuals, populations, and communities.[16]

He argues further,

> Like all of expressive culture, music is a peculiarly human adaptation to life on planet earth. Each music-culture is a particular adaptation to particular circumstances ... Each world [of music] can be regarded as an ecological system, with the forces that combine to make up the music culture ... in a dynamic equilibrium. A change in any part of the ecosystem affects the whole of it.[17]

The ecology analogy is vital in explaining the circumstances that may have caused the death of Ghanaian folk opera, in particular, *The Lost Fishermen*. Based on the ecological principle of connectivity,[18] the fate of artworks, like operas, in this case, may be decided by significant changes that occur in the art forms' own ecological systems, including the purpose/ideology for their creation, changes in generational tastes, and practitioners, technologies, etc.

In Ghana, Acquaye's folk operas were not the only arts that bore the brunt of their own successes. Nkrumah's sculptures were literally pulled down after the coup that toppled his government in 1966.[19] Intangible art forms, like Efua Sutherland's *Anansegoro* classics ("spider" story series), and songs composed to celebrate Nkrumah and his

political projects fizzled out of public prominence soon after his overthrow in 1966.[20] Elsewhere, in South Africa, Andra le Roux-Kemp also writes about public disaffection for the once inspiring South African liberation or "struggle" songs in the new democratic dispensation.[21] Thus, besides their own internal aesthetic features, artworks may survive several generations if their relevance and aesthetic are transgenerational, and transcend ideological interests and values.

The high cost of producing the opera

Beyond this general theoretical reasoning for the extinction of art forms in general, there are other factors that worked, more specifically, against folk opera sustainability in Ghana, and this includes their relatively high cost of production. Operas the world over are costly to produce,[22] and *The Lost Fishermen* is no exception. This is often caused firstly by the size of the cast, then elaborate costumes, sets, lighting, etc. In the case of *The Lost Fishermen*, the cast includes roughly 20 (ten men and ten women); and about ten percussionists and dancers, three directors (including music, dance, and drama), as well as stage, lighting, and logistics managers. Additional cost comes by way of costumes and performance materials, as well as lighting, sound, cost relating to rehearsals, and renting of a suitable space for the show. The first time we succeeded in staging the play, in 2007, the expenditure was so huge that we could not remunerate the actors, which temporarily stalled further performances.

Acquaye succeeded in his day not just because of his multiple expertise as an all-round artist,[23] but also because of the extensive sponsorship deals he was able to garner from both state and private entities.[24] In addition, there was sufficient state support for the arts, in general, by the Nkrumah-led administration and the Acheampong-led military governments. Acquaye also benefited financially and administratively from a well-organised group of patrons that he organised in his capacity as the Promoter of the Arts at the Ghana Institute of Arts and Culture in Accra, between 1963 and 1971.[25] Added to all these was an apparently prevailing spirit of voluntarism by amateur actors. Most of the non-profit Damas Choir members, in particular, who took part in Acquaye's *The Lost Fishermen* productions did so for the love of it, and not for monetary gains. Thus, the gradual erosion of these three—public support, arts sponsorships, and a dwindled spirit of voluntarism—partly explain the death of the genre in Ghana in later years, even though they all lessened the cost of operatic productions in the 1960s and 1970s.

The play's dependence on the author alone for direction

A more decisive factor that pushed Ghanaian operas, and in particular *The Lost Fishermen*, to the brink of extinction, was their dependence on the composer for future performances. This was because the composer/author scripted and published the texts of his ten operas but rarely did the same for the musical accompaniments. For the music, he adopted a hands-on approach to perfecting his initial musical ideas on-stage, which was how he was able to produce ten operas in the relatively short period of twenty years. Responding to my question as to why there were no accompanying music scores to *The Lost Fishermen* script, Acquaye explained,

> when I conceive the musical ideas, I write the initial melodies down in solfa notation, then, after teaching them, I don't need them again so I haven't kept them well enough. You will, therefore, have to rely on the tape I have handed to you.[26]

The composer's approach may be attributed to a technical limitation on his part. Records show that Acquaye undertook only basic music lessons under the legendary Ephraim Amu, during his training days at the Achimota Training College, between 1947 and 1949, where he trained as an art and craft teacher.[27] That basic training may have proven too little to equip him to undertake the kind of notation/orchestration required for operas. The advantage in the oral approach, however, is the emphasis it places on the primacy of sound, action, embodiment, and performance of musical arts as living objects, and not as a written document.[28] Although the hands-on strategy may have allowed the composer to exploit the pliability, processual, and fluid qualities of the integrated oral musical arts that he sought to replicate in his operas, it ultimately jeopardised their future survivability. What ethical and strategic research options can be deployed for preserving, performing and documenting artworks, such as *The Lost Fishermen*, which may suffer similar sustainability fates?

Field contingencies and artistic research methods

The approaches used for recovering *The Lost Fishermen* may be summarised into two performance-based research strategies. First is the strategy to deploy musical performance as the methodological vehicle for the study, where learning to perform serves as the research tool for gathering the undocumented data (songs) needed for recreating that endangered music. Henk Borgdorff and Tanja Orning both describe this kind of approach to artistic research as one "done in the arts," where the research unfolds *in* and *through* artistic practice; in this case, learning to sing/perform.[29]

I was obviously too young to have witnessed any of the staged performances of *The Lost Fishermen* between the 1960s and 80s. The first time I heard about the musical drama was in an oral literature class as a graduate student, in 2002, and I decided to study it for my master's thesis. So, on August 22nd of that year, Addoquaye Moffat, Acquaye's cousin, escorted me to meet the composer for the first time, at his home in the Laterbiokorshie suburb of Accra. Acquaye was blind and sitting alone for most of the time. After the initial introduction and declaration of my mission, he asked me to visit him a few more times, so he could, in his own words, "convince himself if I was serious enough." As part of the familiarisation, I ran a number of errands for him, after which he opened up for discussions about his personal life, works, and, specifically, *The Lost Fishermen*. It was at this point that it became clear to me that, besides the only 1977 video recording of the play (VHS recorded at FESTAC), there was no other source of data on the opera's songs readily available to aid its re-performance. Thus, I decided to add to my initial research objectives the task of assembling and notating the songs as a permanent solution to safeguarding the opera's future.

The effect of the absence of music scores was further exacerbated by the poor state of the only VHS recording available, arguably due to poor handling.[30] Furthermore, efforts to have the composer sing through some of the songs that were hardly audible on the damaged tape proved futile. He could not recall most of them due to memory loss. As a last resort, I requested to know if there were former actors of the play still in existence in the country. This proved a helpful strategy as, once again, Moffat escorted me to meet Abigail Armah and Solomon Sampah in their homes.[31] Thereafter, the two became my personal teachers and, subsequently, consultants to the project to re-stage the play. To immerse myself in the art, I submitted to learning how to sing the songs as my teachers sang them over and over again, and acted portions of the accompanying dramas. I recorded the audio too. To corroborate what I learned from the two, I went

back to Acquaye to sing the songs to him and, to my surprise, he was able to remember and approve them. This was how the entire 46 songs of *The Lost Fishermen* were compiled on tape to pave the way for the opera to be re-staged. The entire process of field research, which began in 2002, had dragged on for three years because I needed to complete my thesis.

Based on this initial fieldwork/data gathering success, the second leg of the project became attainable: to restore stage-performance of the musical drama again, this time, without Acquaye's involvement. This was one of the ultimate objectives of the project. Both Borgdorff and Orning describe this kind of project as "research for the arts," where artistic/performance functions as the result of research.[32] The outcome of this research—the recording and notation of the songs—meant that it was reasonably easy to find interested artists/experts/producers familiar with the opera to join the team for staging *The Lost Fishermen*.[33] In 2006, we initiated the process to audition and constitute a production team (based on Acquaye's model) of 20 people made up of ten men and ten women. The artists were drawn primarily from church choirs nearby in La and Osu since we thought it was relatively easier for good singers to learn to act than for actors to adapt to singing. Based on *The Lost Fishermen's* Nkrumahist ideological orientation, it was easy to get the director of the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum in Accra not only to host the initial rehearsals but also to produce the first performance. We arranged to bring Acquaye to one of the rehearsals in early 2007 as a way to keep him abreast with the revitalisation initiative and to test how well we were doing in comparison to the ones he had directed in the past. However, our strategy failed terribly— Acquaye was overwhelmed by emotions when he heard the choir sing. He broke down and wept at the very beginning, frustrated, as he explained later, over his inability to see and participate. When we could not calm him, we cut short the rehearsal for the day and took him home to continue at a later stage.[34]

In March 2007, the project to find *The Lost Fishermen* finally materialised. We staged the musical drama for the first time in 20 years, in Accra. The show was attended by a modest audience, about half the capacity of the 1500-seater National Theatre, mainly adults. Unfortunately, Acquaye did not live to hear the play; he fell ill soon after the visit to our rehearsal and died on 14 February 2007. We staged the opera a second time at the Alliance Française, in Accra, sponsored by the Danish Cultural Fund in Ghana. The initial idea was to tour the ten administrative regions of Ghana thereafter but, since we could not pay the actors, nor break even financially, this was to be the final run. As a backup strategy, a copy of the 2007 video recording of *The Lost Fishermen* has been donated to the J. H. Kwabena Nketia Audiovisual Archive at the Institute of African Studies, at the University of Ghana, Legon.

Now, as the project to find *The Lost Fishermen* nears its closing stages, I have begun the third strategy: to document the musical data through transcription and orchestration of the full complement of the opera's songs. The idea is to publish a composite volume comprising both text and music as a more durable solution to the problem that occasioned this research in the first place. Having found *The Lost Fishermen*, the ultimate objective is to safeguard it more permanently as part of Ghana's artistic heritage, and also as a lasting tribute to Acquaye, the composer.

Conclusion

Thus, for a genre like Acquaye's folk opera, *The Lost Fishermen*, and indeed all musical arts that suffer similar fates of endangerment, the chances of recovery through research ought to be guided by flexible ethical field strategies, which make room for realities and

eventualities rather than strict adherence to pre-determined approaches. As demonstrated in the narratives above, the often-unpredictable artistic research environment calls for the flexible field approach that should accommodate the deployment of multiple methodological approaches, which may be drawn from other cognate disciplines. Borgdorff calls this "methodological pluralism,"[35] and Orning alludes to it when she says "In research on musical practice, there are no ready-made methods. It is a young discipline in rapid development that borrows and steals from anything that help shed light on the questions we ask."[36] We may well call this the "common sense approach" to artistic research.

In addition, the idea to adopt a performance-based approach was, first, dictated by the understanding that certain fundamental epistemological issues can best be addressed through artistic practice. This is evident in the nature of the art form in question and the research problem it presented—the fact that part of the work was never documented and could only be accessed through interviews, apprenticeship, and immersive lessons—gives credence to that understanding. More importantly, however, the operatic art in a performance art underscores the fundamental principle of music as sound, action, and embodiment.

There are nine other folk operas by the same composer that are also threatened with extinction if no intervention is made. Like *The Lost Fishermen*, all that remains of most of them is a script without a musical score, and the hope of locating former actors to assist with resurrecting their accompanying songs is fast fading as the years pass by. Giving the unpredictable nature of the field of artistic research, the lessons from *The Lost Fishermen* can only be a useful starting point.

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Notes

1 Orning, 'Music as Performance'.

2 Euba, 'Concepts of Neo-African Music as Manifested in Yoruba Folk Opera'.

3 Allen, 'An American Folk Opera?'.

4 Acquaye, *Folk Opera in Ghana and Nigeria*, 1.

5 Quoted in Vieta, *The Flagbearers of Ghana*, 436.

6 Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, 64.

7 Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*.

8 Senghor, *The Foundations of 'Africanité' or 'Négritude' and 'Arabité'*.

9 Masaeli, Sanni Yaya, and Sneller, *African Perspectives on Global Development*.

10 Acquaye, 'Modern Folk Opera in Ghana', 60.

11 Offei-Ansah, 'The Lost Fishermen'.

12 Kambona, 'The Lost Fisherman', 5.

13 Grant and Sarin, 'Gauging Music Vitality and Viability', 27.

14 Udumukwu, 'Achebe and the Negation of Independence'; Mortimer, 'Independence Acquired—Hope or Disillusionment?'; Obi, 'A Critical Reading of the Disillusionment Novel'.

15 Titon, 'Music and Sustainability'; Titon, *Worlds of Music*.

16 Titon, 'Music and Sustainability', 123.

17 Titon, *Worlds of Music*, 9.

18 Titon, 'Music and Sustainability'.

19 Gavua, 'Monuments and Negotiation of Power'.

20 Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings*.

21 Le Roux-Kemp, 'Struggle Music'.

22 Jenkins, 'The Cost of Opera'.

23 Acquaye was a multi-talented artist; he was a musician, art teacher, administrator, designer, sculptor, carver, dramatist, impresario/producer and a great sportsman. Those qualities equipped him to undertake such tasks with minimal assistance.

24 Advertisements in a brochure for *The Lost Fishermen* in 1965, by the Damas Choir, shows about seven private sponsors including Panam Air, GNTC Bottling, and the Akosombo Textile Ltd.

25 This information has been garnered from Acquaye's Civil Service file, reference number 1 C/6, 7 January 1963.

26 Acquaye, Interview by Moses Nii-Dortey.

27 Nii-Dortey, 'The Life, Works and Worries of a Genius'.

28 Orning, 'Music as Performance'.

29 Borgdorff, 'The Production of Knowledge'; Orning, 'Music as Performance'.

30 I cleaned the VHS and transferred the data onto DVD at the International Centre for African Music and Dance (ICAMD) sound lab, the Music Department, University of Ghana. However, both the recording and the handling had already undermined the quality. Thus, a good number of the pieces were barely audible for purposes of learning and transcription, and some of those already transcribed needed corroboration.

31 Abigail Armah, now deceased, was then a resident at North Kaneshie, Accra. She, a member of the famous Damas Choir, often played the lead female character in *The Lost Fishermen*, Koshie. Solomon Sampa (affectionately called Paa Solo), also now deceased, acted as the lead male character, Ataa Amasa, in both the recent two stage presentations in 2007 and 2011.

32 Borgdorff, 'The Production of Knowledge'; Orning, 'Music as Performance'.

33 Addoquaye Moffat, Acquaye's cousin, who directed the drama, brought on George Dzikunu, the dance choreographer of Adzido Pan African Dance Ensemble fame, together with his cultural band of six percussionists and four dancers; Hisri Quaye (now deceased) then Director of the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum provided rehearsal space at the mausoleum and also some initial funding for the actors; Aboagye Afari, the PR of the National Theatre, served as the producer; and Nii Amu as our set designer. While Sampa joined the cast, Armah could not, due to old age, but provided free consultancy at the rehearsals.

34 He fell ill not long after and died weeks before we staged the musical play—its first in Ghana in 20 years.

35 Borgdorff, 'The Production of Knowledge', 46.

36 Orning, 'Music as Performance', 82.

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