In praise of mothers: Songs composed by Ghanaian musicians as tribute to motherhood

Kofi Poku Quan-Baffour
Department of Adult Education
School of Education
University of South Africa
quanbkp@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

Mothers in Ghana play a unique and important role in the life of their children. Many of them lay down their lives for their children in times of danger, and may, be prepared to die to save them. Motherhood carries lots of responsibilities, costs and risks. From conception to birth and from birth to maturity mothers carry, nurse, cuddle, clean, wash, nurture, care, support, protect, guide and bring up sons and daughters. These huge responsibilities mothers carry out at no cost to children or their fathers. In some cases, mothers may undertake all these responsibilities without any support from the children's fathers. The unique and unconditional love demonstrated by most mothers usually builds a strong bond between them and their children. The Akan saying: 'se woni wu a na w'abusua asa' ['when your mother dies your family is finished'] is an affirmation of the incredible work of many mothers and the seemingly irreplaceable bond between them and their children. Many Ghanaian children pay tribute to their mothers for the role they play in their lives. It must however, be mentioned that not all the praises children shower on their mothers may be genuine. Some of the praises could be ironic because sometimes the relationship between mothers and children might be strained. There are instances where mothers are accused of killing or bewitching their children. This paper however, discusses and analyses some selected songs composed and sung by some Ghanaian artists in acknowledgement and recognition of the wonderful and enormous role mothers play in the life of children.

Key words: bond, children, detest, ironic, motherhood, praise, song

Introduction

To the African and for that matter the Ghanaian, music and life are inseparable. Music has a strong relationship with Ghanaian identity. Musicality is an innate drive, which is as fundamental as speech. Among Ghanaians musical instinct seems to be smothered through the conformity to some social expectations. Gracyk (2007:177) affirms that in studying the social construction of identity, many researchers examine music's role in the articulation of gender, class, ethnicity and social status. It is argued here that music is an important 'badge of identity' of Ghanaians. Even within a social constructionist paradigm, in which each individual's musical identities are seen to depend on contingen

socio-cultural vicissitudes, musical identity might prove to be a deep element of identity so that the music one liked as an adolescent is more noteworthy than how one wore one's hair (Gracyk 2007). In Ghana there is music for almost every activity and occasion. Music is played in social, economic and political contexts. In all Ghanaian languages folk and *hi-life* songs are composed and sung to indicate the singer's attitude to life, criticise or warn unacceptable social behaviours, express hope, aspirations, fear, thoughts and appreciation to God and specific people in society. In affirming the fact that music is a Ghanaian identity Nana Afua Abasa (1995) remarks; 'we speak with music, music is a story, music is born out of events'. Isidore Okpewho (1992:138) adds that love, the feeling of affection or tenderness towards a person or a thing is expressed in traditional African songs in several ways.

Some folk and *hi-life* songs are devoted to mothers in appreciation of the role they play in the life of both their biological and social children. Many mothers lay down their lives for their children in times of danger and are prepared to die to save them. Among Ghanaians the words 'mother', 'father' and 'child' are not used in the narrow but in much broader and collective sense – any adult of one's parents' age is referred to as mother or father, depending on the gender and by the same token any boy or girl is literally a child to every adult. Thus, motherhood and fatherhood covers both biological and social siblings. To this end, the parents of one's spouse are his or hers parents too. The motherhood issues raised in this article therefore embrace both the narrow and expanded use of the term 'motherhood'. Motherhood carries lots of responsibilities, costs and even risks. From conception to birth and from birth to maturity mothers carry, nurse, cuddle, clean, wash, nurture, care, support, protect, guide and bring up sons and daughters. In some cases mothers do all these without any support from the father of the children. The unique and unconditional love of most mothers is what makes mothers and their children develop strong bonds. The first teacher in the life of every child is the mother, and in most cases a child's first word is 'ma' or 'mama'. The Akan saying: '*se woni wu a na w'abusua asa*' ['when your mother dies your family is finished'] seems to acknowledge the incredible work of mothers and the seemingly irreplaceable bond that exists between most Ghanaian mothers and their children.

There are however, songs that criticise some mothers. There might be some Ghanaian mothers who forget that a child is made by a father and mother. Such mothers might be too possessive and often create conflict between children and fathers in pursuit of their own selfish marital agenda. There are instances where mothers take advantage of their closeness to children and covertly or overtly use them to fight their marital 'wars'. Such situations might lead to conflicts between some children and their fathers. This observation is in no way an attempt to defend fathers who shed their responsibilities. There is no doubt that there might be very good and responsible fathers, whose efforts to bring up their children could be concealed or thwarted by some mothers because of marital discord or divorce. They may even go a long way to destroy the relationship between fathers and their children. In view of this reality of life, it is possible that not all praises children offer their mothers through songs are free from criticisms, admonition or even detestation. There are some songs of praise that could be ironic. As

children grow they might question some actions of their mothers, which they see as an impediment to their future development. Such instances could receive disapproval from children – hence some songs could subtly condemn them. In Ghana there are instances where mothers are suspected of killing, bewitching or abandoning their children. These evil acts are portrayed in some of the songs. This paper discusses and analyses some selected songs that acknowledge mothers' role in bringing up children, but also advises wicked mothers to refrain from mistreating children.

Songs indicating open praise for mothers

Many Ghanaian artists compose and sing numerous pieces of songs to express love and appreciation for the role that mothers play in the lives of their children. In most cases the language of praise is lofty and sometimes exaggerated. In praise songs the subject is often given attributes and characteristics that are either not possible within the laws of nature or at least, go somewhat beyond the truth (Isidore Okpewho, 1992:139). One example of a song that gives open praise to mothers is '*Eno woo me Okatakyie*' ['My mother gave birth to me as a great person'] by Alex Kunadu. A few lines from the lyric are discussed here.

Eno woo me Okatakyie
W'abre me ho yie paa asnsa na meyin
Menso me hwe no bi ooh
Owuo eeih!
Mesre wo ara ma me nsie Eno
Ansa na mawu.
Ena awo me eeh
Ena w'obre me ho yie
Enti wo se ayie ooh
Se me yie a mentoto w'ase ooh koraa.

[My mother gave birth to me as a great person
She really toiled and suffered to bring me up
I will also take care of her till she dies
Death, I entreat you to permit me to live
to bury mother before you take me away
My mother, you gave birth to me
You toiled, struggled, and sacrificed for me
You really deserve praise and gratitude!
When I prosper I will never turn my back on you.]

In this song the artist portrays the authentic everyday reality of how a typical Ghanaian mother sacrifices whatever she has and even her life to bring up children to be adults. The *hi-life* song is a tribute to all mothers and an acknowledgement for their unpaid job and responsibility of carrying, caring, nurturing, protecting, clothing, educating and guiding their sons and daughters to become adults. The performance of this song is accompanied by music and dance in accordance with steps that are culturally familiar to the audience.

Usually the delighted audience seizes the opportunity offered to them to sing the words in the song and dance to the tune of the accompanying music (Isidore Opkewho, 1992:134). Music, like language, is a form of communication, which embodies the story and experiences of the performer-composer and his/her relationship with society and the environment (Ampene, 2005:40), and this is exactly what this *hi-life* song does. It is played and sung at various cultural or social occasions, including naming and marriage ceremonies to communicate feelings of appreciation and experiences about motherhood. The emphasis in this song is on the content of the story, the experiences and the message being narrated. The message communicated through this song is threefold- appreciation, gratitude and promise of reciprocity.

The song acknowledges the fact that good mothers deserve gratitude from their children. It is a clarion call to all children to reciprocate the good things mothers do for them in life. Mothers toil to bring up children. The onus is therefore, on every child who grows up to reciprocate this reality when their mothers become old and need support. This song seems to affirm the adage: 'one good turn deserves another'. It warns children not to turn their backs on their mothers when they succeed in life. When they are working and earning, sons and daughters must remember where they are coming from – the products of mothers' toil, struggle and sacrifice, in some cases by a single parent!

'Enowaa ko hyen nni?' ['where has mum gone?'] is an emotional lamentation *hi-life* by Cann Adoes. A few of the lines are reproduced and analysed here:

Enowaa ko hyen nni?
Enowaa ko baabi nso wankra
Asem bone krado a safoa do ano
Eno waa ko baabi,
baabi koro ne hyen?

[Where has mother gone?
Mother has gone somewhere
But did not tell me
Bad news which is like
a padlock with a key
mother has gone somewhere
but where is that somewhere?]

This *hi-life* song laments the loss of a mother whose sudden death, [departure] has left her children dumbfounded. The expression '*asem bone krado a safoa da ano*' [bad news put under lock] indicates how difficult it is for the children to come to terms with the loss. The mother's sudden departure and absence is too difficult to explain. It is like a door which has been locked and the key thrown away. The song describes how death takes people away without warning. This made the mother leave without saying goodbye to her children. The children know that their mother is gone but cannot tell where she went. She has made a journey, which does not have a 'return ticket'. This is a genuine tribute to a mother, who is a pillar to her children. Her absence has created a vacuum which no one can fill. The indication here is that motherhood is very important

and cannot be taken for granted. Once one loses one's mother, there cannot be any real replacement.

Another song that acknowledges or recognises motherhood as the source of support, wisdom and good counselling is '*Maame, Wo kaa ye ooh!*' ['Mother eeh! you said it!'] by C. K. Mann. Few of the verses are reproduced here.

Maame eeh! Wo kaa ye ooh!
 Se Onipa bebre ooh!
 Onipa bebre ooh!
 Wo n'abrabo yi mu
 Onipa bebre ooh!
 Wo n'akwantu yi mu
 Maame eeh! Wo kaa ye ooh!
 Se onipa bebre ooh!

[Mother eeh! You rightly said it
 That life is war and a struggle
 Mother eeh! You rightly said it
 That a person may struggle through
 the journey of life]

Mothers have enormous influence on their children and apart from providing them with physical needs such as food, shelter, protection and clothing, they give children pieces of advice about life. This is an even more pronounced and important aspect of motherhood in the matrilineal society of the Akans, where clans always choose the best member to lead them. Mothers with foresight do their best to guide and counsel children to be ahead of their peers in the clan, and also to be able to cope with life. The song above by C. K. Mann, is a recognition of good advice from a mother. The singer recounts through the song how his mother used to warn him to prepare well in order to cope with or withstand the 'storms on the journey of life'. The suggestion is that the child in the song or the singer perhaps did not take the warning from his mother seriously when he was young. In the wake of socio-economic difficulties life has become too tough for him and perhaps, through some introspection, he has realised too late the value and wisdom of the late mother's advice hence the interlude, '*maame wo kaa ye ooh!*' ['Mother, you warned me!']. He seems to say 'mother you told me, but I did not listen'. Sometimes life teaches people lessons the hard way. Regretting some lost opportunity in life, the singer pays tribute to his mother and wishes he could turn back the time. This song is a great lesson to all children who sometimes do not listen to their parents. It warns children not to wait till it is too late to realise that there is wisdom in parental counselling.

Praise songs tied to criticism

There are songs sung in proverbs as dirges for mourning the death of mothers. The singing of dirges among the Akans is such an established art form that there is a recognised body of conventional usages and quite a few standard phrases and ideas in

a particular dirge. In some of the dirges or emotional songs sung in praise, for departed mothers, there is sometimes subtle criticism. Isidore Okpewho (1992:147) affirms that a great deal of critical spirit is embodied in African oral literature. Some of this is found within what generally passes as praise poetry. The harshness of such criticisms might be quite pronounced in some societies. It is known for instance, that court poets in traditional Akan and Zulu communities frequently told the ruler, in no uncertain terms, where he had gone wrong (Isidore Okpewho, 1992). In the Akan society criticism is expressed in the spirit that society must be guided by certain standards of conduct from which not even mothers, fathers, elders, chiefs or rulers are exempt. An example of a dirge in proverbs that mourns, praises and subtly criticises mothers is '*Yaanom Me Dunsini Abu*' ['Compatriots, my stump is uprooted!'] by Kunadu. A few lines of the dirge are reproduced here.

Yaanom me dunsini abu!
Na osoafo ne hwan?
Owuo de Ena ko
Nea me su gu ne so de awereho akoda agya me
Me sumafo ne hwan?
Eno eeh! Eno eeh!
Ene dee wo ba m'wie ooh!

[Compatriots members my stump is uprooted!
Who will carry it for me?
Dreadful death has taken my mother away
She, on whose shoulders I cry has gone to sleep
in sorrows and left me
Who will be there for me again?
Mother eeh! Mother eeh!
Your child's life is completely shuttered from today!]

This is a song of lamentation by a child who has lost his/her mother. The song tells how important a mother is to children but underneath the praise and lamentation of the loss is a subtle criticism of the mother's over-indulgence. The song indicates the over-dependence of a child on the mother. It also points out the fate of a child who is over-dependent on the mother. In a subtle way, the song seems to blame mothers who over-protect their children to the extent of not training them to do anything for themselves. They provide children with everything – food, clothes, shelter, protection and love – but no social and economic skills to fend for themselves in the event of their departure. Children of such mothers become helpless when the latter pass away. The song also warns mothers not to over-pamper their children because too much over-dependence could become counter-productive. It can shutter the lives of children after the mother's death. In the Akan world mother is seen as a source and seat of all sympathy and support, so strong is this feeling. The Akans are matrilineal people with deep and strong feelings of attachment to mothers. The word *Dunsini* means a stump and the expression '*me dunsini abu*' ['my stump is uprooted!'] tells it all. The mother was like

a stump of a tree, an irreplaceable support for the child. She was indeed a shoulder on which the child depended for everything. The question now is, what happens to the child now that his mother is gone for good? The suggestion here is that by being too attached, sympathetic and providing children with everything most mothers never allow their sons and daughters to learn to lead independent lives, hence the cry *Eno wo ba m'awie ooh!* ('Mother, your child is doomed!'). As an act of desperation children who are over-dependent on mothers could be vulnerable to all sorts of crimes such as prostitution, housebreaking or drug peddling when they lose the maternal comfort they used to enjoy in life. They might be too lazy or lack skills to work. The death of the mother could therefore, shutter their lives or completely spell their doom.

Okwan so kose kose ('tread or travel solemnly') is another dirge. The song was composed and sung by Amakye Dede in proverbs for mourning the death of a mother. This song is somehow ironic for those over-dependent on mothers. A few of the lines are:

Owuo de dom beko
 Odomankoma boo owuo
 Maa owuo kum no
 Owuo de Ena beko
 Eno eeh! Eno eeh!
 Ene dee woba m'awie ooh!

[The dreadful death takes whole people away
 The one who provides in abundance created death,
 which ironically took Him away.
 Death has taken my mother away
 Mother eeh! Mother eeh!
 As for today your child is finished!]

Like the previous one in this section the song above laments the loss of a bread winner, a mother. The line *Eno eeh! Ene dee woba m'awie ooh!* ['Mother eeh! as for today your child is finished!'] is a cry of desperation, devastation and deep regret. It carries some amount of blame for the merciless Death who has taken Mother, the source of comfort and the breadwinner, away. The verse also seems to suggest that the child's mother made him too dependent on her – hence her death is a complete blow to him. The song is characterised by a high degree of both vocal and instrumental musicality. The singer's voice is that of everyday speech, although he introduces vocal twists at certain intervals to create [sorrowful] feelings in the audience (Isidore Okpewho, 1992). The words in the song are known to its audience – hence they sing it whenever it is performed or played over the radio.

The central message of this song is that mothers must teach their children to do things for themselves. It criticises mothers who over-pamper children by indicating that any mother who makes her children too dependent on her does not seem to really love them because her departure from the physical world could create serious socio-economic problems for them.

Songs that admonish mothers

There is a general perception among Ghanaians that not all women are good mothers because some mothers are regarded as the source of children's woes in life. There are some mothers who are accused of destroying children's lives physically or spiritually, either by neglecting, abandoning or bewitching them. In view of this perception, whenever things go wrong in the life of a son or a daughter, e.g. barrenness, miscarriage, frequent death of babies, divorce, illness or debts, mothers [including aunts, grandmothers, mothers-in-law and even sisters] are usually blamed. Some songs openly insinuate, criticise and even castigate mothers. The Akan, the largest ethnic group, is mainly matrilineal. Thus, every daughter in the Akan society would want to bear children to continue the clan lineage. It is for this reason that barrenness, miscarriage, loss of babies and marital discord are perceived to be the 'doings' of the wicked mother, who does not want her particular child to succeed in marriage. Nketia's poem entitled *Eno Abrewa tirimodenfo* ['The cruel niggardly old woman'], which is also a folk song, is an example of songs that castigate mothers for the wickedness against their children. A few verses of the song are reproduced here.

Eno Abrewa tirimodenfo, yamonwenefo
Ono na otu gya ko afikyire
Koto borede maa onnitire dii
Onwunu redwo ooh!
Awisiaa afe ne Na

[The cruel niggardly old woman
She made fire behind the house
There she roasted plantain
and fed the headless
instead of her children
Darkness is approaching
the orphan is longing to
see his mother.]

This folk song, which is sung in proverbs exposes the wickedness of some mothers. The proverb 'making fire behind the house to roast plantain for the headless to eat, while her children starve' emphasises the extent of a mother's cruelty. The indication is that the mother does not care what happens to her own children, whether they are fed, starve, clothed, sheltered, bear children, work or are unemployed. The expression 'roasting plantain and feeding it to the headless' could also mean throwing away things that could improve her children's lives or hiding important things from them. Although their mother is still alive the children look like orphans who long for the mother's comfort during evening when darkness sets in. To bring children to the world and neglect or subject them to pain is a very serious social crime among Ghanaians. It would be better not to have children than to abandon, neglect or subject them to pain and misery. To most Ghanaians only a witch could do such a thing. The song is a condemnation of wicked mothers, who through evil actions subject their sons and daughters to unnecessary

hardships. The message here seems to be: 'If you cannot or are not prepared to love and bring up children do not bear them.'

Another folk song that detests the wickedness of some mothers is *Se mereko a menam Dwuma ase* by Koo Nimoh. The gist of the song is:

Se mereko a me nam Dwuma ase
 Se mereba me nam Dwuma ase
 Dwuma ayi ban abo me ama asase agye me taa taa
 Dwuma bue eeh! Maame eeh!
 Me wu a na ebo adwo ooh!

[Whenever I go out I walk beneath the Dwuma tree
 When I come back I walk beneath the Dwuma tree
 Suddenly the Dwuma tree has hit me with a branch which made me lose balance
 Mother eeh! My death may make you satisfied!]

The above song, like many *hi-life* songs is sung in proverbs. The artist chose this style to be anonymous and blunt in carrying his message home without fear of reprisals. This song portrays the tribulations and frustrations of a hardworking but ill-fated child, who does not seem to succeed in life despite all the efforts made. The sudden strike of the witch [series of life problems] is symbolised by the branch of the Dwuma tree falling on a passer-by. The singer suspects that the mother is a witch and responsible for all his woes such as infertility, illnesses, divorces, marital discord, unemployment and poverty. The child is very much frustrated for his apparent lack of progress in life. Hence the cry, *maame se me wu a na ebo adwo* ['Wicked mother, my death may make you satisfied']. The child seems to say since you will not stop thwarting all my efforts to succeed in life it is better for me to die so I can make you happy.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the appreciation Ghanaian artists show for the role of mothers in the lives of their children. It also points out some of the bad things some mothers do, which may strain their relationship with their children. A mother's role in the life of children is enormous and full of sacrifices. To be able to bear children and bring them up, sometimes alone as a single parent in a developing country requires much commitment and sacrifice. The article advises mothers to train their children to be independent so that in case they die suddenly, the children may be able to take care of themselves. This article warns the mothers who, perhaps due to socio-economic problems; abandon, neglect or subject their children to untold hardships, to be more responsible and regard child upbringing as a social call of duty. Those women who see bringing up children as too much of a burden should not bear them. The article concludes that mothers who bring up their children are more likely to be cared for by the same children when they become old. Such mothers may not only be good examples to their community members, but also leave good names behind when they pass on.

References

Primary sources [Discography]

- Amakye Dede 1986. Kose kose. Kumasi, AK Brobbey Music Production Ltd.
Cann Adoes 1983. Enowaa ko hyen nni? Kumasi. A K Brobbey Music Production Ltd.
'Ceekay' [C.K] Mann & His Carousel Seven 1975. Accra, G B C Productions.
Kunadu, Alex K. 1976. Eno woo me Okatakyie. Kumasi. A K Brobbey Music Production Ltd.
Kunadu, Alex K. 1997. Me dunsini abu. Kumasi. AK Brobbey Music Production Ltd.
Koo Nimoh & Adadam Agofomma. 1990. Me nam Dwuma ase. Kumase. Adasa Records Ltd.

Secondary sources

- Ampene, K. 2005. *Female Song Tradition and the Akan of Ghana: The creative Process in Nnwonkoro*. Aldershot. Ashgate Publishing Company Ltd.
Gracyk, Theodore. 2007. *Listening to Popular Music*. Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press.
Nana Afua Abasa. 1995. Ghana Advertiser, March Issue.
Nketia, J. H. 1954. *Funeral Dirges of the Akan People*. Achimota. Townsend & Sons Ltd.
Isidore, Okpewho. 1992. *African Oral Literature: backgrounds, character and continuity*. USA, Association of American University Presses.