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*Chapter 17*

**Male Chauvinism: Men and  
Women in Ghanaian Highlife  
Songs**

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Literary sources enjoy increasing attention from social scientists, who scrutinise them as valuable sources of information. Feminist authors and other students of women's roles have been particularly active in this field.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter we investigate how husbands, wives and lovers are depicted in popular Ghanaian songs called 'highlife'. Throughout we confine ourselves to Akan highlife songs and to Akan society as such. First we shall discuss some methodological problems of this exercise. Next we give a brief description of the general role of highlife music and we continue with some remarks about Akan marriage and male-female relationships based upon anthropological evidence. Finally we analyse a number of highlife texts, relating them continuously to anthropological evidence. Our view is that highlife songs on the subject of marital problems often function as ideological charters expressing the male point of view.

Our data derive from two different types of research: participant observation<sup>2</sup> and collection, transcription and translation of highlife songs.<sup>3</sup> Although these two research approaches vary considerably, they are in this case closely connected. The importance of highlife songs in Ghanaian daily life dawned upon Van der Geest only through his fieldwork. People's love for both music and texts of highlife became clear to him on many occasions. During funerals the young people neglected the traditional drumming and danced to the tunes of highlife (cf. Bleek, 1975, pp. 68-9). Every evening young people grouped together near a canteen to listen to highlife. In the compound where Van der Geest lived children and grown-ups eagerly played the few highlife songs which he happened to have on cassette.

Participant observation also provided a framework for the interpretation and analysis of the songs. Van der Geest carried out investigations into some of the very problems which are dealt with in highlife songs: marriage and divorce, love affairs, inheritance, witchcraft and death. The anthropologist, therefore, can provide background information to clarify the meaning of highlife songs. But can the songs help the anthropologist understand life in this society? In other words, can the songs be used as ethnographic material? There is no simple answer to this question. The ethnographic use of songs and other forms of popular art is beset with methodological problems. Fabian (1978, p. 321) lists a number of questions which need to be answered before an anthropologist can treat any form of popular art as ethnographic information. These questions refer, among others, to the identity of performers and public, and social setting of the performance, its purpose and the use of poetic figures.

Some authors suggest that novels, songs and other forms of literature should be treated simply as information given by an informant. There remain, however, some thorny problems with such an approach. In the first place, there is a vast difference between information collected during face-to-face interviews and information which is transmitted through, for example, a song on a record. The anthropologist in an interview situation is, to a large extent, able to judge the reliability, the validity and the meaning of the communication. He knows the setting in which the information is transmitted, he knows the informant and he himself is the listener. Further, he himself has determined the purpose of the conversation, and when the informant's purpose deviates from his he will probably notice it.

An anthropologist using art material as data lacks this privileged insight and it is uncertain whether he will find answers to all the questions formulated by Fabian. There is a great danger that he will fall into *Hineininterpretierung*, which may lead to false conclusions about the meaning of the content.

A second problem is that the purpose of an interview usually differs greatly from the purpose of a popular song. A song usually wants to entertain, an interview to collect accurate information about certain topics. It is possible that the artist has to discard reality in order to entertain his audience. Science fiction, fairytales and fantasy literature, such as Tolkien's writings, seem to confirm this. The point is, however, that an author who tries to escape his social or political reality in his writings reveals another – ideological – reality (see Blécouet, 1979). To take the two extremes: an artist may try to entertain his audience by portraying their life situations as closely as possible, or by allowing them to fly far away from their actual life. In both cases, however, the artist holds a mirror in front of the public. In the former instance the mirror reflects their lives, in the latter their

wishes and fears. Art which does not reflect anything of the public is unlikely to entertain or move them. The spectators will feel unconcerned. The degree of popularity of a particular song or story may well be an indicator of how successful the artist has been in depicting a particular feature of the people's life, but it remains a difficult task for the anthropologist to find the exact point of reflection: whether he has to do with actual behaviour, repressed behaviour, or wishful thinking.

The same difficulty arises when we attempt to analyse highlife songs. But our knowledge of marriage problems in Ghana, based on everyday experience and fieldwork, gives us important clues as to how each song should be interpreted. Some are based on true events, others may be rationalisations and others again idealisations. Looking very critically at this chapter we must admit that the texts have augmented our understanding of Akan marriage only a little, but rather our acquaintance with this topic has helped us to understand the songs.<sup>4</sup> Our insights into Akan husband-wife relationships have prompted us to regard highlife songs not as simple accounts of the problems which occur in married life. Although many songs probably describe true events, they do more. They give an interpretation, a biased view, of the events which are related. In this interpretation the male point of view is instilled into the listener's mind. Highlife songs on marriage, therefore, assume an ideological character: They form part of a cultural complex which – at various levels of consciousness – is to uphold the ideology of male supremacy. In this respect these highlife songs are similar to other songs which have a clearly political or social function. One may think of military songs and protest songs which aim at rallying support for a political case (see Zimmermann, 1966, cited by Doornbos and Cook, n.d.) or bring about feelings of solidarity in suppressed groups (see Hannerz, 1969).

### Highlife in Ghana

Highlife is a blend of traditional Akan rhythms and melodies with European musical elements. It encompasses a variety of artistic expressions: music, dancing, singing, story-telling and theatre. It originates from the end of the nineteenth century, but its exact source is not known. From the 1920s onwards, however, its history is well documented (see Bame, 1969, 1975; Darkwa, 1974, pp. 138–48; Collins, 1976a 1976b). It started on the coast but has now spread over the whole of southern Ghana and other West African countries. It seems that at first urban life and social mobility were predominant themes in highlife songs. The term 'highlife' suggests that too; it reflected the life of the 'high (Ghanaian) society' in towns. Collins

estimates that at present there are about fifty highlife bands in Ghana, but there are probably more than a hundred. Some are famous and have lasted a long time; many, however, disappear after a short time and sink into oblivion or start again in another composition and under a new name.

Highlife is in the first place music. People enjoy its rhythm and if they do not like the music the song will never become popular. But the text is important as well. Highlife is played in homes and in drinking bars, at parties and at funerals. At market places and lorry parks people gather near radio boxes to listen to highlife during 'listeners' choice'. There are national competitions for highlife bands which attract a lot of people. Highlife is played during intervals of football matches, at trade fairs and other public occasions.

Highlife is so popular and its texts are so well known that it lends itself as a medium of communication. It is sometimes used to send a political message, more or less in disguise. During Nkrumah's regime E. K. Nyame composed a highlife song saying:

Before it is going to rain  
the wind will blow.  
I warned you  
but you did not listen.

Nkrumah's opponents interpreted the song as a critique of his government and Nkrumah banned the song. Similar incidents took place under Acheampong and during other regimes.<sup>5</sup>

Popular highlife texts can also be borrowed for phatic communion among friends and acquaintances. One song, for example, entitled 'Okwadio' (a type of wild ox), tells a story about how the ox managed to set itself free from a hunter. It then became a fashion among friends to refer to each other as *okwadio* if someone was considered to have been lucky. At the same time this song assumed a political meaning as well (see Bame, 1969, pp. 68-9).

The popularity of highlife shows itself also in the fact that titles of successful songs are given to particular cloth designs. It is not clear whether this happens spontaneously (Boelman and Van Holthoorn, 1973, p. 239) or whether it is a marketing strategy.<sup>6</sup>

### Male and Female In Akan Marriage

There is something ambivalent in marriage among the Akan. On the one hand people do not seem to consider it very important. Young people try to avoid it as long as they can (Bleek, 1975, 1976; Dinan, 1977, ch. 25). Married people easily separate, divorced people are

not always willing to start a new marriage, and relatives look askance at a marriage in which husband and wife develop a close relationship (Bleek, 1975).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, people cannot do without marriage. It still marks the transition to adulthood, young people have romantic expectations of marriage and there even seems to be a growing sense of 'illegitimacy' when children are born outside marriage.

A similar ambiguity is to be found in the husband-wife relationship. On the one hand women are, to a large degree, independent of their husbands. Economic assets and incomes remain strictly separated, almost half of the women in rural places live apart from their husbands, the matrilineal principle marks the husband as a kind of outsider *vis-à-vis* his wife and children, and women as often as men initiate divorce, as has been described in several earlier chapters. On the other hand, a – perhaps slightly superficial – observer notices considerable subservience and respect on the part of the wife towards the husband.

Female subservience, however, should not be taken literally. An increasing number of authors, who have observed women's subordination to men in various societies over the whole world, take the view that so-called female subordination is often a facade hiding a large degree of equality between the sexes. They view it as a power game, in which women buy off a large quantity of practical power in exchange for allowing men public respect and status (see Rogers, 1975).

This model seems to fit the Akan marital situation reasonably well (see Bartle, 1978), but there remains one enigma which resists the glib application of the equality model. This is the inequality in opportunities for husbands and wives to contact additional sexual partners, either within or outside marriage. Only men can afford to take a second partner in marriage; only men can afford to commence extra-marital liaisons more or less openly. This inequality has found its way into highlife songs. This inequality itself is, however, not criticised in the songs; on the contrary its roots are confirmed. The songs function as an ideological instrument proclaiming the superiority of men.

### Husbands, Wives and Lovers in Highlife

Singing, playing and composing highlife is mainly a male affair. Female performers are rare and the few who do exist<sup>8</sup> are probably male oriented as well. As a rule male singers play the roles of both men and women. It is likely, therefore, that highlife songs confirm the ideology of male supremacy. The female partners in a polygynous

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marriage are presented as competing for the husband's favour. Significantly, the Twi term for co-wife is *kora* (rival).

In a song entitled *Asiko Darling* the singer, Eddie Donkor, describes the co-wife relationship as follows:

Uncle Kwasi, I shall tell you a story.  
There were two co-wives.  
The youngest of them was the senior wife.  
A quarrel broke out between them.  
The younger one said to the older one:  
'I win the husband through the  
delicious soup I make.' (twice)  
You know, when women quarrel they  
want to insult each other.  
So the younger wife said that she pleased  
the husband most because of her soup.  
The older wife replied: 'Eei, you win  
him with soup? Then I shall win  
him with love-making, haha.'<sup>9</sup>  
Good soup or love-making . . . over to you.

Nana Ampadu, who at present is probably the most popular high-life singer, uses the co-wife relationship as a setting for a symbolic story about alertness in a hostile environment. The song is entitled *M'ada me ho so* ('I am watchful'):

'If my words are bad,  
summon me before the elders in the chief's palace  
and I will open my defence.'  
There lived co-wives,  
it seemed they liked each other,  
it seemed they did not like each other.  
One day the younger one decided to travel.  
When she said farewell  
the older one gave her money  
to buy something for her on her return.  
The younger wife took the money and asked  
what she should buy for her.  
The older one said she should buy something  
called 'If I get the opportunity, I will harm you',  
she should try and buy this article.

When the younger wife returned  
she told the other that she could not get  
what she had asked her to buy.  
Instead she had bought something called  
'I-am-watchful'.  
The elder became annoyed and took offence.

The younger replied that she had not done anything wrong.  
 'If my words are bad,  
 summon me before the elders in the chief's palace  
 and I will open my defence.'

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The same singer, Ampadu, in another song uses the polygynous marriage as a proverbial example of rivalry and jealousy, whereas the husband appears as the only sensible – but troubled – person. The song is entitled *Somu gye w'akrantee* ('Take your grasscutter'). In the song the husband is a civil servant. One day, when he returns from work, he buys a grasscutter and an antelope. He takes the grasscutter, which is considered as one of the greatest delicacies, to his elder wife, and the antelope, which is less appreciated, to the younger one. The younger wife becomes annoyed and refuses the antelope. She starts a bitter quarrel with the husband and the other wife. The older wife is also not satisfied with the grasscutter and so she also gets annoyed and starts quarrelling with the husband. The next day the man must take an examination. He is so confused because of the incident that he only writes his wives' abuses on the paper. He fails the examination and is dismissed from his work. The man then divorces both women. Jealousy as the basic pattern of co-wife relationships is also mentioned in another song by Ampadu: *Aku Sika* ('Golden Aku').

These songs show the effects of polygyny from an extremely male point of view. Reasons why polygynous unions are decreasing in number are more complex than is suggested by these songs. It is not so much jealousy between the wives of one man which creates problems for the polygynous household, but rather the entire socio-economic position of men and women. An analysis of this complex of factors – in the form of a story – would not result in emphasising male supremacy. It would rather show the absence of male dominance and the existence of equality and independence on the part of wives. For a song with this content it is still too early.

Songs which disturb the ideological facade of male superiority endanger the power relationship between wives and husbands. Even women, therefore, prefer to keep the facade intact in order to safeguard their interests. The following incident, reported by Kleinkowski (1976, p. 63), is typical. For the annual meeting of a Ghanaian women's organisation a (Twi) song was composed which said: 'The belief of the past that men are superior to women gives way to a new era: men and women are equal.' The women liked the song but did not want to sing it because, as they said, their husbands would stop giving them 'chop money' if they heard the song.

Another song to illustrate our point also describes rivalry between two women. One woman is superseded by the other as a man's

marriage partner. Although the title of the song *Okunu pa ho ye na* ('Good husbands are rare') suggests criticism of men, the song really describes the foolishness and wickedness of women. The singer is again Ampadu.

If you find one get hold of him well, sister,  
A good husband is rare. (refrain)

Before Nana Yaa left the house to stay with her husband, her grandmother called her and gave her advice. Nana Yaa took a chair and sat down. The grandmother started:

'Be careful with the venture you are going to take. Marriage is a very long thing, that is why it is called *awaree* [a very long thing].<sup>10</sup> You are a child going to taste marriage life for the first time. But don't go and think childishly. Don't reject the advice of an elderly person. Don't go and make many friends, don't listen to gossip – because gossip leads to the downfall of a town. Don't go and make many friends because it is due to making many friends that the crab lost its head. Nana Yaa, obey your husband in all respects. If he offends you, report the matter to your landlord so that he will settle the dispute. A house affair is not a rag which can be washed and dried in the open. It is not something which should be known by everyone. Since you will be a stranger in that new place people will be interested in what you buy at the market every day. The glory of a home lies in the woman, and the glory of a woman lies in the husband. I hope that the little I have said will sink into your ears. A wise child is talked to in proverbs and not in ordinary speech.'

When Nana Yaa left to stay with the husband, the husband used to give her four shillings daily as chop money. Nana Yaa never complained and spent the four shillings accordingly. After about six months, she got a certain friend called Awura Afua – who was single. When the two of them met at the market, Awura Afua asked Nana Yaa: 'Nana Yaa, how much money does your husband give you every day as chop money?' Nana Yaa answered: 'Four shillings'.

'Nana Yaa, what can you buy with four shillings at Obuase – here?  
Even I who am a spinster sometimes go to the market with six shillings – sometimes I spend even ten shillings a day.  
How many cloths has your husband bought for you since you became his wife?'  
Nana Yaa (exclaiming) – 'Since I came to live with him, he has not bought any cloth for me. Not even a headkerchief.'  
'Nana Yaa, you are too submissive.  
If I were you, I would divorce the man.  
I once had a husband who treated me in the same way. Since I divorced him, I am living peacefully and feel very free.  
Nobody is my master.'

When the following day Nana Yaa's husband gave her four shillings, she refused to take it. She told her husband Kwaku Yeboah that four shillings was too little for a day's meal because Obuase was a town where prices are high. She asked the husband to add more. The husband replied: 'Since you came here, is it not four shillings that I have been giving you every day? What has prompted you to ask for more?'  
Nana Yaa became annoyed and insulted the husband. The husband also became angry and slapped her. 'Agyaee' (screamed Nana Yaa). 'He has killed me, this marriage is finished. My mother did not bear me for you. How could you slap me like this? I am going to my town.'

When she reached home, she told her story that the chop money given her by Kwaku Yeboah was not enough and that when she complained, Kwaku Yeboah had slapped her. She had therefore decided to put an end to her marriage with Kwaku Yeboah. From then, Nana Yaa went to live in Kumasi where she tried all sorts of things without success. So she returned home and asked her grandmother to go and plead to the husband to enable her to go back to stay with him.  
'Had I known is always too late.'  
Nana Yaa and her grandmother went to Obuase. When they reached home, Kwaku Yeboah had not returned home from work. A woman in the

compound told them that Kwaku Yeboah's wife was in the room (climax).  
Nana Yaa was startled and asked who the new wife was who had taken her place. When Nana Yaa entered the room, she realised that the new wife was nobody but her own friend, Awura Afua.  
'Eei, Awura Afua, that's how you are. You advised me to divorce my husband so that you could take my place. You said four shillings was not sufficient and now you are living on that.'  
The other replied: 'Nana Yaa, I want you to understand that you have not bought Kwaku Yeboah. In this world, some people even like the intestines of a civet cat (everyone has his own taste). You did not like Kwaku Yeboah and I have replaced you. If it pains you, go and die.' (4 times)  
'I will never leave Kwaku Yeboah until I die. If it pains you, go and die.' (2 times)  
Nana Yaa began weeping. She wept and continued weeping.

When Kwaku Yeboah came home he refused to accept Nana Yaa back as his wife. He told Nana Yaa that it was too late for her to return to him because her place had been taken by somebody else. So if you get a good husband hold fast to him because good husbands are rare. (refrain)

The copious use of proverbs in this song is striking. Proverbs are frequently quoted in highlife songs. They too present the male view of life and help to keep up the facade of male dominance.

The theme of the above song appears also in a song by Konadu. Here too another woman has pushed the lawful wife aside. She assumes a very superior attitude and abuses the former wife. The most superior person in this triangle is, however, the husband, because it is for his love that both women are competing. We only cite a few lines. The song is called *Wobewu a kowu* ('You can go and die'). The intruder is speaking:

Yes, you can go and die.  
It was your property  
but you joked with it  
and somebody has taken it now.  
Yes, you can go and die.  
You had every opportunity to drink it,  
but you joked with it  
and now somebody has drunk it.

The male point of view is also present in songs which describe extra-marital love affairs. It is nearly always married *men* who have such affairs and although there is a tone of criticism in the songs, they express at the same time secret admiration of this male prowess. Songs showing secret admiration for extra-marital affairs of *women* are unthinkable.

In a song called *Sensam* ('Weeds') Ampadu relates a quarrel between a married woman and another woman who is suspected of being her husband's girlfriend. The married woman challenges the other as follows:

Useless weeds, useless weeds,  
you are just growing under the palm tree.  
Come and live in the house  
as a recognised wife.

She continues to say:

My husband takes you as a wooden bed  
but me as an iron bed.

In a song by the City Boys Band a man speaks to women about love in a very viricentric way. The title of the song is *Ankwanoma Dede* ('Lonely Bird').

Our sisters, the women  
don't understand what love is.  
Some women, when they are asked  
to talk about love,  
behave very strange.  
When a young man calls a woman  
to talk to her about love,  
the response is: 'As for me, as for me...'  
*Agyei* [expression of pain],  
Women, sisters, love is expensive.  
Love is like a necklace,  
Someone wears it, another one wants it.  
Therefore, women, sisters,  
if a young man calls you  
to talk about love,  
you should be patient and listen to him,  
because love is expensive.

In a number of songs a deserted girlfriend complains that people laugh at her because she has been 'sacked' by the man. An example is *Odo san bra* ('Darling come back') sung by Pat Thomas:

Darling we have stayed together for a long time  
I don't know what I have done against you,

but you have sent me away.  
My enemies are laughing at me.

The theme of shame is a powerful instrument to instil ideas of male superiority. Another way is to describe the intentions and behaviour of women in a denigrating manner, as happens in the song below. The song is entitled *Mmesiafo yi* ('These girls') and is sung by Pat Thomas:

These girls, if you have money,  
they go with you.  
The day you don't have money,  
they will broadcast your poverty,  
to give your enemies the chance  
to laugh at you.

The same denigrating tone is found in a folk-song which is sung by young (male) children to make fun of girls:

Kooko aben, nkanfoo aben  
Nea mmaa pe ne apotonsu

The meaning of this song is that women like to eat food which is ready. They will come as soon as it is ready and when it is finished they leave unceremoniously. It is striking that such children's songs expressing sexual antagonism can exist, whereas there is no doubt that in actual life eating and cooking behaviour by men and women tends to be the opposite of what is suggested by the song. It shows that the possibilities of ideological inversion of reality are almost unlimited.

The supposed superiority of the male lover over the female one is, finally, well expressed in a song with the telling title *Si Ejisu* ('Get down at Ejisu'). The song is sung by Konadu:

I was travelling with my lover to Accra.  
Ampofowa, your character  
prevented you from seeing the sea  
Darling, get down at Ejisu. . .

The journey had hardly started  
when you started misbehaving.  
So, get down at Ejisu.  
If you marry an educated woman,  
you become her interpreter.  
Ampofowa your character prevented  
you from seeing the sea.  
Get down at Ejisu. . .

I won't stay with you any more.  
Go away with your mortar,  
I take my pestle. . .

The song confirms in a very authoritarian way that women should be obedient to men and that inequality between the two sexes is necessary.

### Conclusion

The aim of this exercise has been to show the ideological character of a number of popular songs which are usually considered as pure amusement. Highlife songs in Ghana which deal with marital problems, particularly problems connected with the polygynous and 'polycoitous' nature of marriage, often present a highly biased account and interpretation of these problems. This bias consists of a systematic emphasis on male superiority. Highlife songs, therefore, form part of a general cultural complex which upholds male superiority over women.

The fact that songs about polygyny and polycoity express male dominance most vividly is not surprising. Legal polygyny and extra-marital love affairs are still largely reserved to men and pose an enigmatic phenomenon in a situation where a high degree of equality exists between men and women. This phenomenon, therefore, lends itself pre-eminently to exalting the male ideology.

The result of this ideological function of highlife music is not, however, true dominance by men. On the contrary, there are indications that the cultural complex of male dominance is tolerated and even desired by women. A facade of male dominance enables them to retain power and independence in more hidden domains.

It should be taken into account, however, that musical entertainment such as highlife does not necessarily reinforce existing ideologies. Songs may as well assume a revolutionary and educative function by propagating new ideas and pleading for suppressed groups. It is not unlikely that this will happen to highlife when more female musicians enter the stage.

### Notes: Chapter 17

Nimrod Asante-Darko and Sjaak Van der Geest conducted fieldwork together in 1971. Apart from the two authors, many more people have been involved in the collection, transcription and translation of highlife songs. We are especially indebted to Samuel Asamoah, Kwasi Anim, Boakye Danquah, Margaret Hall-Badoo, Veronica Ampofo, Kofi Asiedu and Gifty Anin. We are also grateful to Kwame Arhin and

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- 1 A few examples from Africa are Case, 1977; Essomba, 1974; Hammond, 1976; Kilson, 1977; Lee, 1974; Lippert, 1972; Mutiso, 1971; and Zerbe, 1974.
- 2 Participant observation was carried out mainly in two six-month periods of fieldwork in a rural town in southern Ghana. A part of the first period of fieldwork was carried out by both authors together, the remaining fieldwork by Van der Geest alone. It should, however, be noted that Asante-Darko, as a native of the Asante in southern Ghana, brings into this chapter the most intensive 'participant observation' possible. A substantial part is based on his personal experiences and observations within his own community, with regard both to husband-wife relationships and to highlife music in general. This chapter is the result of close co-operation and long discussions between an insider (Asante-Darko) and an outsider (Van der Geest) to Ghanaian society. The latter, as an anthropologist, asked most of the questions; the former attempted to answer them or reformulate them.
- 3 Collecting texts of highlife songs is an entirely different research activity. All songs collected by us exist on records manufactured by Ghanaian companies. Recording, transcribing and translating them was chiefly office work. Most of this work was done by Asante-Darko but various other people were involved as well (see above). Until now, 107 songs – not a representative sample – have been transcribed and translated, many of which touch upon problems in the marital relationship. In this chapter we discuss one theme which appears particularly frequently in highlife songs: rivalry and feelings of jealousy which occur in marriage. Although the two research approaches mentioned above vary considerably, they are in this case closely connected.
- 4 The ethnographic use of highlife songs was more directly profitable in a study of the image of death as depicted in the songs (Van der Geest, 1980).
- 5 The political meaning of highlife songs is dealt with more extensively in Asante-Darko and Van der Geest, n.d.
- 6 There are more similarities between cloth designs and highlife. Boelman and Van Holthoorn (1973, p. 243) point out that clothes can have communicative functions. Certain occasions prompt people to wear certain designs, e.g. a design called 'handcuffs' was worn to protest against arrests under the Nkrumah regime.
- 7 Someone who loves his wife too much is disparagingly called *mmaafodie*, i.e. someone who hangs around women.
- 8 Three quite famous female highlife singers are Vida Rose, Janet Osei Donkor and Rose Awura Amma Badu.
- 9 The joke, according to a translator, is that it is older wives who are famous for cooking and young wives who are better at love-making.
- 10 *Awaree* means both 'marriage' and 'it is long'.