

ORPHANS IN HIGHLIFE: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION*

SJAAK VAN DER GEEST
MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY UNIT
UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

I

In 1971 and 1973 I carried out anthropological fieldwork in Kwahu-Tafo, a rural town of about 5,000 inhabitants on the Kwahu plateau in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The first research project was a case study of the family I was staying with; the second was on ideas and practices concerning sex and birth control. As usual in anthropological research, my attention was drawn to many other things around me. One of these was Highlife. This short essay discusses the texts of some Highlife songs, which intriguingly related to my experiences in the field.

II

It was impossible not to be struck by the importance of Highlife in the dreariness of daily life in Ghana. In the evenings large groups of young people assembled in front of the local bar to dance and listen to Highlife, the sounds of which resounded over the town. Many of the youngsters sang the texts along with the music. The typically empty interior contrasted strangely with the crowd outside. They were attracted not only by the music but also by the light—the bar was the only place in town with electricity. And, of course, it was the place to

*As I will explain in this paper, my interpretations of Highlife texts would have been impossible without the help of many friends. I only mention the most important ones: Kwasi Asante-Darko, Kwasi Addae, Anthony Obeng Boamah, Benjamin Boadu and Yaw Darko. An earlier version of this text was presented at the symposium “Popular Music from Ghana: Historical Records as a Contribution to the Study of the History and the Cultures of Africa” in Basel, December 8, 2002. I am particularly grateful to John Collins, Wolfgang Bender and Veit Arlt for their comments on that paper and to Sera Young for editing the text. I dedicate this brief essay to Kwasi Addae and Isaac Oppong, friends and one-time orphans.

meet members of the opposite sex. Women and children were present to sell bread, tea, fried plantains, and other snacks. Around 10 p.m. the bar usually stopped the music; the lights went off, and the people dispersed. I became curious to know what the songs were about. Although I had learned some Twi, I was not able to understand them, so I asked someone to translate one text for me. The content aroused my interest and I decided to collect more Highlife texts. Various people helped me: school pupils, teachers, university students, and others. After recording the songs I had them transcribed in Twi and then translated into English.

Whenever I was working on the songs, children drew near the small cassette recorder to listen to the music and join the singer. When we were busy doing other things, they asked me if they could listen to the Highlife on my cassettes. It all contributed to my interest: why were these songs, both the music and the lyrics, so popular? The few attempts I made to get in touch with the makers of these songs failed. I was particularly impressed by Nana Ampadu, a native of Kwahu and the then Absolute Number One of Highlife in the eyes (ears) of my friends. I paid a visit to his hometown, Obo, but I met only suspicious older relatives who were unwilling to tell me much about their famous nephew, let alone share with me some of his texts. Fortune seemed to come my way when Ampadu's African Brothers Band came to perform in Kwahu-Tafo, but in spite of the promise of this appearance on the posters, Ampadu's never materialized. I wrote a letter to him and gave it to the members of his band, but never received a reply. A third attempt to contact him also failed.

One of the consequences of my failures to meet Ampadu and other Highlife artists was that I had to continue the painstaking work of transcribing texts from cassette tapes. I was not the only one. Some years earlier, unbeknown to me, Owusu Brempong, who was once a research assistant to the anthropologist Michael Warren in Techiman, had also been busy collecting Highlife songs and had faced the same problems. In his dissertation on Akan Highlife, Brempong mentioned that he befriended a record seller who allowed him to listen to the songs and who pointed out which songs were the most popular. He spent several months with the man transcribing and translating songs. Brempong writes (although his words could have been mine):

Transcription was the most tedious part of the project. In most cases I spent a day or more working on one song. Often, a number of words proved to be unintelligible. Several people (both young and old) were consulted, and with the help of several ears – so to speak – I was able

to identify the words, which were missing from my transcriptions (Brempong 1986:29).

After I had left Ghana, friends continued to spot the most popular or interesting songs for me and sent me their transcriptions and translations. By 1978 I had a collection of about 100 songs; to date this number has grown to almost 200. Most of them deal with the familiar problems of life such as poverty, loneliness, hatred, jealousy, witchcraft, marriage problems, death, and funerals.¹

I started to read the songs as “key informants” on the culture I was studying. Reading the texts in the context of the society in which they were produced, performed, and listened to, or—more precisely—comparing their stories and comments with the stories and comments I heard from the people around me, I tried to make sense of both my fieldwork observations and the song texts. These attempts at cross-checking texts and contexts resulted in a few publications on the meanings of death, gender relations, family hatred and witchcraft, and politics (Asante-Darko/van der Geest 1983; van der Geest 1980, n.d.; van der Geest/Asante-Darko 1982).

Another theme that struck me in the songs I had collected was the plight of orphans in Akan society. The topic drew my attention for three reasons. In the first place I was struck by their frequent mentions in Highlife. Secondly, it coincided with some developments in my fieldwork (see below). Finally, it seemed to contradict the official Akan kinship ideology. Friends usually claimed that orphans in the Western sense of the term do not exist in Akan society, as every child had several mothers and fathers. The Highlife songs with their loud emotions suggested, however, the opposite, and so did the eagerness with which these songs were received. I was not the only one who was intrigued by the frequent appearance of orphans in Highlife; both Brempong (1986) and Collins (1994) devote attention to the theme of orphans.

III

Eleven songs in my collection and three from Brempong’s narrate and lament the fate of an orphan. Several more do so in passing. Collins (1994:388) mentions still others, as do Bame (1985:44) and Yankah (1984:574) (See the appendix for an overview). Before I discuss some of these texts, however, I should relate two almost identical memories from my fieldwork. When I settled in the house of “my” family in

¹It is my intention to publish the most interesting ones, both in Twi and in English, with elaborate annotations.

1971, I looked around for a young boy who could help me with various household chores such as collecting water and buying food. A boy presented himself before I had really started looking. He proved an excellent and reliable helper and also performed several research tasks including recording and transcribing Highlife songs. After some time I discovered that he was an orphan and that his position in the family had prompted his association with me: he expected me to become some kind of father to him. About twenty years later I returned to Kwahu-Tafo to do research among older people. I found a room in the town and asked a boy of about fourteen who regularly hung around me if he was willing to help me. He agreed and became a valuable assistant. Not long thereafter he told me that both his parents had died and that he and his brother, living in the same house, had a hard time surviving. He complained that no one in the family cared for them.

Highlife songs about orphans sound like the complaints of my two young assistants. In “Ade ayè me” (Disaster has fallen on me) an orphan is lamenting his (her?) lot. The singer speaks of the death of his mother, which in the eyes of most (matrilineal) Akan makes one an orphan:

Aao a miserable thing has happened to me - 3x
 I am crying because of my plight,
 Ao a miserable thing has happened to me.
 Orphan, as for today something miserable has happened to me,
 My mother has died and left me alone.
 She has made events take me by surprise,
 Who will be my comforter?
 From now on I have no adviser, small child my face is full of tears.
 Afua Animura, you [your death] are the cause of my plight.
 Ao, a miserable thing has happened to me - 3x
 Hmm, brothers and sisters, every death is painful,
 But a parent's death is the most sorrowful of all.

...

There may be no good person to take good care of the children
 This may let the children get stranded in this world.
 To be miserable and have nobody to care for them,
 Afua Animuraa, you have put your child into trouble now.
 Ao, a miserable thing has happened to me - 3x
 Hmm, every orphan is miserable - 3x
 When my mother died, I thought she left me a good caretaker.
 One evening, after meals I went out to play and stayed long.
 I decided to run back home to sleep, but the door had been locked.
 I became frightened and knocked several times.

There was nobody who loved me so much as to open the gate for me.
If my mother were alive,
Because of the love she has for me even if she were sick,
She would have tried to wake up for me, but now that my mother is
dead
I am going to sleep outside and suffer.
Afua Animuraa, you are the cause of my plight now.
Ao, a miserable thing has happened to me - 3x
I am crying because of my plight,
Ao a miserable thing has happened to me.

Similar observations about the hard life and sadness of children who lose their mother are mentioned in other songs, for example in “Maame Adwoa” (Mother Adwoa), “Ofie Nwansena” (Houseflies), “Aka me nkoa” (I am left alone) and “Ankonam mɔbro agyanka” (Lonely miserable orphan). These are a few lines from the last song:

Lonely miserable orphan, ee, look at my end [destiny].

The child of the ghost, this is me,
Something has fallen into my eyes. [I am in distress].

Lone miserable orphan, ee, look at my end,
The child of a ghost, this is me,
Something has fallen into my eyes.

Darkness has reached me in the afternoon,
A double-tongued fellow has trapped and caught me, ooo.

Mother Abena come and see your children,
We are in need, what can we say to bring it to an end oo?
(Translation O. Brempong)

In “Onni-bie asem ye mmɔbɔ” (The orphan’s case is miserable), hatred of relatives is added to desertion, loneliness, and neglect. “Onni-bie” literally means “the one who has no one.”

The one who has nobody (to help him) is to be pitied.
The problems in my house are not rags to be washed and dried outside.
If only someone could advise and comfort me!
Today my own relatives hate me.
Aoo! How then would outsiders not maltreat me?

When the elephant knocks you down, the deer will do the same.
 That is what had to happen.
 My mother, who would support me,
 Is dead and buried at the cemetery.
 I am a child, left alone to struggle in life.

In “Hini me” (Open the door for me) we hear the tragic story of an orphan girl Abena, who lives with a rich man and his wife (probably as a housemaid). On Christmas day she goes to play with some friends and forgets the time. It is already dark when she decides to return home. At that moment she meets Sasabonsum (a Satan-like monster in the Akan mythology). He accompanies her home but warns her that, if the people in the house do not open the door for her, he will kill her and eat her up. When she reaches home she knocks and knocks desperately but in vain, the door remains locked. She starts singing that Sasabonsum is with her and will kill her if they do not open, but no one responds. The next morning, when the people open the door, they find only the skull and the clothes of Abena lying in front of the house. The song ends with advice to all step-parents to treat their stepchildren well. As we have seen, a similar story is told in “Ade aye me” (Disaster has fallen on me).

In “Gyaesu” (Stop crying) an orphan is exhorted not to lose courage. The song is more about death than about being an orphan—the term “orphan” is used to underscore the harshness of death:

Stop crying, someone’s child, stop crying,
 Don’t cry, orphan.
 There is a difference between a grown-up and a child.
 It is painful when a mother dies, but what can you do, orphan?
 It is from people that you get comfort.
 Someone’s orphan, very sorry, but keep courage.
 It is a new day and death is again with us.
 Mother; death wanted her and nothing could be done to save her.
 She has fought and lost.
 So from today she will no longer pamper you.
 The one to whom you could go when you were hungry,
 Is no more.
 The one who used to cook food and who called you to come and eat,
 Is no more.

Comfort to the pitiful orphan is also the theme of another song “Mewɔ hɔyi” (I am here):

I am here, an orphan in this world.
I will depend on my God alone.
My whole life rests on Him alone.
I know I have nobody to depend on.
So I will not put my hope on anybody.
I hope to get my food and my shelter from God,
Because he is my helper.
Aoo! An animal without a tail,
Aoo, God will drive away the flies.

The happiest (ending) Highlife song on orphanhood is “Aku Sika” (Golden Akua). It is a Cinderella-like fairy tale about an orphan who receives a raw deal from her step-parents but finally, through her patience and trust in God, becomes the most loved wife of the paramount chief. The song was tremendously popular during the period of my research in the early 1970s. The title of the song, “Aku Sika,” was given to a cloth pattern, as is commonly done with the titles of popular Highlife songs to boost the sale of the cloth. Both the song and the cloth thrived at the time.

Only a few songs discuss the consequences of the death of a father. One of them is “Oheneba” (son of chief, prince):

Oheneba is the one whose father is still alive.
[...]
When your father is alive,
You may think that your uncles, nephews and aunties love you.
But after your father’s death, you will see how much they loved you!
Oheneba is the one whose father is still alive....
I did not expect that my end would come this way.
I never dreamt of such a humiliation.
My father was a rich and prosperous man,
So I thought, I would be an Oheneba till my death....
When, as a child, I was mischievous,
My father always said:
“As long as I am alive, I shall not let you down,
But remember: soon I shall leave you
And then you will see how the world is....”
When my father died,
He did not leave me much property.
I can do any type of work,
But my problem is that nobody wants to help me.
When I ask people for a loan, they ask:
“Have you finished your father’s money

And have you now started to wander about?"

Really, Oheneba is the one whose father is still alive.

Summarizing, it is all misery that the singers of Highlife convey about the condition of orphans. Words of comfort may sound more optimistic, but they too confirm the orphan's plight. I did not come across one Highlife text in which the condition of an orphan was painted in more cheerful colors: in terms of happiness and caring relatives who took the role of the deceased parents. The official doctrine of Akan kinship taught me a predominantly optimistic view of orphan life, but the Highlife songs were unanimous in denying that happy picture. What was I to make of this contradictory information? Who of my "informants" was lying? My two "boys" seemed to confirm the view of the Highlife singers and so did some of my field notes from 1971, based on a couple of conversations I had with an orphan (A):

In my first interview A talked a lot about his father, how he had helped him in many ways. When I asked him further about his father, he told me exactly what had happened to his father after his mother's death. He had married another woman, had divorced her, and was now working in Accra. He had a good job and sent him money at times. Later on I heard from someone else that A's father had died two years after his mother. I did not know what to think of A's story and assumed that he had been speaking about his father's successor or another relative. People often talk about their "father" without making distinction between real father, stepfather, father's brother, etc.

So, one day, I asked him whether he had meant his stepfather when he had mentioned his "father". He denied it. I repeated the question, but he replied in the same way. Then I asked him bluntly, whether his father had not died. The answer was very short: No, he was still alive, working in Accra. Bewildered, I was about to ask him whether the person who had given me the information was perhaps mistaken, but then I saw how he turned his head away, trying to hide his tears. The next moment he was crying aloud, got up and tried to leave the room. I convinced him to stay and calm down first.

Finding a good successor for a deceased mother or father seems well-organized in Akan society: the family chooses that person a few days after the funeral of the parent. During my research I discovered, however, that the system worked less perfectly than is generally believed. There were ten children younger than 17 years in "my" family, who had lost their mothers. Out of these ten only one girl was staying with the person who had succeeded her mother. There were three

children who had lost their father and were younger than 17. None of them was staying with the father's successor (Bleek 1975:304-11).

In 1994 I returned to Kwahu-Tafo to carry out research on perceptions and experiences of old age. I also used the occasion to discuss the position of orphans with some of the older people. I first asked Opanyin (Elder) Kwaku Nyame, to explain to me the exact meaning of the two Twi terms that were used for "orphan" *agyanka* and *ayisia*. His answer was that there was no difference between the two words; both, he said, referred to a child that had lost its mother. What about a child whose father had died, I asked. The same words were used for such a child, he answered, but the child without a mother was a "real" orphan (*agyanka pa*). Clearly the Western restriction of the term "orphan" to a child that has lost both parents did not translate to the Akan terminology. The awareness of orphanhood seemed mostly related to the experience that the deceased parent—whether father or mother—had taken proper care of the child and was now being missed. In other words: lyrics about the orphan's misery were implicit songs of praise for the caring parent. We continued our conversation on the difference between the loss of a father and of a mother. Kwaku Nyame said:

In the case of a mother, it is hard to get someone who would treat you as your real mother. Some stepmothers give their own children more attention than an *agyanka*. At times, when the *agyanka* is not in the house, a stepmother may not leave food for him. A real mother could never do that. Have you seen that young man NN, who drinks a lot? No matter how much he drinks in town, his mother makes sure that she leaves him some food. Do you think a stepmother would do such a thing?

Another elder, *Dkyeame Kwame Opoku*, whom I asked about orphans, said approximately the same:

Mostly we use the word *ayisia* for people who have lost their mother. Because they become miserable and the loss is felt much more because maybe it was the mother who was preparing food for the *ayisia* and gave him a place to sleep when he was still a child. Anyway it is painful to lose a father but the effect is not so serious on a child. Those who lose their fathers are mostly not referred to as *ayisia*. . . . No one can care for you as your mother does. When your mother dies your aunts will never do to you as your real mother was doing. Some of them are so wicked that they don't give the *ayisia* enough food as they do to their own children. Some stepmothers are even noted for maltreating

their stepchildren. That is why we give that proverb: *Se wo na wu a na w'abusua asa* (The death of a mother is the end of one's family).

Both men, however, also emphasized the importance of a father and at the same time indicated that not all orphans faced hardship after the death of their father. Kwaku Nyame:

When your father dies and you are lucky, the one who succeeds him could at times do as well as the father was doing. When my father died. I was very young but the one who succeeded him looked after me very well. He even married for me [found a wife for me]. At present Teacher Okoto is a third generation father [distant relationship] to me but whenever he comes from Nsawam, he brings me bread and calls me to eat with him when he gets food. How he treats me, I don't think my own father would do so if he were alive today. That is why we say: *Agya bi wu a, agya bi te ase* (If one father dies, there will be another).

Although both men agreed that no one could fully replace the mother (they seemed more optimistic with regard to replacing the father), they also emphasized that many times relatives did their best to look after their sister's child and that the child appreciated their effort. They provided examples from their own life and their immediate environment to illustrate their point. The problem, they said, might also lie with the person's character. Certain orphans just blame their step-parents or relatives for any problem they may encounter. I am inclined to agree with them. The transcription below of my (S.) conversation with J., a young orphan boy, illustrates their point:

J.: My mother died in 1986. In those days I was in primary school class 6. I was not having any particular person to care for me so I was just hustling by myself till I reached Senior Secondary School.

S.: You were saying when your mother died no one was caring for you?

J.: Yes.

S.: No one?

J.: OK we were in holidays when my mother died so that term's fee was paid by the extended family. The next one was paid by my brother who decided to pay for the next term too but during that time he was not in a position to help so it looked as if I had to stop school. But I didn't want to stop since I was good in school, so I started doing some petty jobs like farming to keep me through till I completed Junior Secondary School.

S.: Were you staying with your mother when she was alive?

J.: Yes

- S.: What about when she died?
J.: I continued staying here.
S.: Who was in the house? Were there any sisters of your mother?
J.: Do you mean the one who inherited [succeeded] my mother?
S.: Yes.
J.: I don't stay with her. She stays in a different house.
S.: She doesn't care for you, nor give you food?
J.: No.
S.: At all?
J.: Yes.
S.: Who is she? Is she your mother's sister?
J.: Yes.
S.: Your mother's sister, and she doesn't give you anything?
J.: No.
S.: At all? Are you sure?
J.: Yes.
[...]
S.: What happened in 1988?
J.: I realised that there was no one to help me so I had to work hard. My mother had already introduced me to farming, so from 1988 I started making farms and planted maize and cassava. From this I was able to pay my school fees till 1993 when I completed Junior Secondary School. When the results were in I had passed. V. (his father's cousin) then continued to pay the fees for Senior Secondary School up to this time.
S.: How much are the school fees?
J.: Thirteen thousand cedis (then about 13 USD).

During our conversation J. at first criticized his relatives for not helping him, but gradually it became clear that he did get some help. It did not change his opinion, however, that his relatives cared little for him. The remark by the two elders that orphans are often inclined to blame others because they think that their real mother/father would have done more for them, makes sense. Implied in that remark is, moreover, the suggestion that even real parents are not always able (or willing) to help their children materially. In that sense, many children whose parents are still alive share the lot of orphans.

Collins (1994:388-90), in his discussion of the plight of orphans in Highlife and concert parties, believes that the popularity of the topic has to do with the "stresses and strains in the polygynous system." Conflicts between co-wives are extended to their children and will become particularly fierce if a co-wife dies. The other wives are unlikely to take the role of the real mother. His assumption that a co-wife

rather than a mother's sister succeeds the mother is doubtful, however (although one of the songs he quotes suggests this). In most cases a relative to the mother will "inherit" her and take up her maternal task. The growing problem of orphanhood—if it exists—is more likely to be related to the "nuclearization" of Akan kinship arrangements. Traditional fostering may be decreasing, as Collins (1994:389) suggests. More and more fostering these days is crisis fostering due to divorce, migration, and death.

IV

The question remains: why is the orphan in Highlife so much more miserable than the one in the reality of everyday?² Are the singers presenting a biased view of their society? Are they unreliable informants? Or are their song texts informants of another kind and should the anthropologist understand their words in another way? In her review of popular arts in Africa, Karin Barber (1987:5) takes a line by Trotsky as her point of departure. Trotsky calls artistic creation "a deflection, a changing and transformation of reality, in accordance with the peculiar laws of art." Somewhere in her discussion she refers to my article on Ghanaian highlife songs about death (van der Geest 1980) and remarks that I treat them "as if they were transparent, without convention at all: direct mirrors of people's actual feelings or experiences" (Barber 1987:36). To her, I seem to suggest "that highlife songs are innocent of aesthetic or religious purpose, of metaphorical language, and of ideology—that they simply open a window directly onto people's unmediated deepest fears" (Barber 1987:37). I admit that my treatment of Highlife lacks the sesquipedalian style of some colleagues' writing on popular art, but it is not that simple.

My approach to the texts is inspired by the cautiousness of the hermeneutic circle and the modesty of Geertz's "thick description:" they are bound to be incomplete and contestable. My main ambition

²The same could be said about popular literature (e.g., Gyamfuaa-Fofie 1995, 1996, n.d.) and Ghanaian soap operas, both of which love the orphan's misery as a plot (but always with a happy ending). Proverbs also underscore the pitiful picture of the orphan. No proverb speaks in favorable terms about the life of an orphan. Four examples: "Orphan, are you satisfied? He replies, 'If you give me as much food as your own child, I will be satisfied.'" ("Ayisaa, woamee anaa? ɔse: woma me senea woma wo ba a, anka mamee"). "Orphan, ask for the skin, not for the liver." ("Ayisaa, pere were, na mpere mmerebo"). "When an orphan is hungry, they say he is sick." ("ɔkɔm de ayisaa a, yese ɔyare"). "When an orphan weeps, tears come easily." ("Ayisaa su a, ɔmmre nusu ho"). It was suggested to me, however, that the proverbs want to confer the idea that a mother is irreplaceable, rather than to report on the life of orphans.

has been to get an inkling of what the singers are talking about, why they do so, and why the public gets so excited by their stories. They are not presenting a widespread social problem in their society. They strike a chord in their listeners because they air a widespread, deep-seated worry. The hermeneutic approach advises moving back and forth between text and context, between reading and participant observation, until the two have almost merged.

My starting point is that the meaning of popular songs is relatively more accessible than that of most traditional poetry in Akan communities. In fact their very orientation to mass consumption makes this statement sound like a tautology.³ In popular art there are fewer vested cultural interests to be legitimized and safeguarded than in formal esoteric traditions. I do not assume that there are no interests in popular arts. No anthropologist would ever say such a thing. The interests are of a different nature.

In other publications I have, sometimes together with a Ghanaian author, shown how Highlife songs are used as an ideological tool—for example, to justify and reinforce male chauvinism (Asante-Darko/van der Geest 1983) or to criticize Ghanaian politicians (van der Geest/Asante-Darko 1982). The Dutch sociologist Goudsblom (1979), who discusses the relation between literary imagination and daily experience, rejects the idea that the relation simply exists in a reflection in the sense of mirroring what “is.” He views literary imagination as a continuation, an extension of the human experience. That continuation can take different forms: it might be a “reflection” of the social world, but it might also be a “reflection” or expression of what people hope for, deny, fear, etc. The term “reflection” therefore should not be taken too lightly. Highlife is an expression of human experience or, to return to Trotsky, a transformation of reality. Reflection hardly ever exists without deflection.

In her discussion of popular novels in Ghana Newell (1997) quotes the writer Konadu, who wants his readers “to make up their minds.” The novels are not representations of “reality” but invitations to think about life. They are, so to speak, means of reflection that require “read-erly participation.” Highlife songs have the same mission. It is the task of the anthropologist to make sense of the songs by studying them in the context of their production and reception. A Highlife song—or any text—has no final meaning of its own. Its meaning becomes lucid when

³Meyer (2000:67) draws a similar conclusion with regard to the popular video industry in Ghana, “which stays close to audience expectations.” She quotes (2000:73) some film directors who complain that “one could only make a profitable film if one echoed concerns from the street.”

one attends its performance and takes part in the event that encloses it. Intratextual interpretation, however interesting, will not produce ethnographic data.

It should be pointed out that the most common reception of Highlife songs is not a live performance or a concert party. Highlife is first of all music and words blasting from amplifiers in shops, bars, lorry parks, and cars, during funerals and other festivities. Highlife is not so much played by artists on podiums but by (illegally produced) cassettes in public and private places, where it mixes with the sounds of everyday life. People passing by hear the songs, remember the lines, and may spend a thought on them. A conversation may be stimulated by the lyrics, as happened frequently when I was waiting for transport in lorry parks or traveling in buses and taxis. I have related one such a conversation about the song "Aware bone" (Bad marriage) elsewhere. In that particular case the driver of the bus I was traveling in gave his views on the meaning of the song: the "bad marriage" that the singer described was the marriage between the president and mother Ghana. "We," the children were suffering, he explained (van der Geest/Asante-Darko 1982). A household story suddenly became a political protest.

Within the context of fieldwork we may hope to arrive at a plausible understanding of Highlife songs. Conversely, the texts may help us to deepen our understanding of particular events or emotions. That is the way I came to interpret Highlife songs about death, man-woman relationships, politics, witchcraft, and envy. I attended more funerals than I can remember and felt the meaning of those songs in the crying and drunkenness of those who danced to them. I observed and experienced the uneasy and unequal relationships between men and women, which the Highlife singers justified by taking them for granted. I discussed Ghanaian politics with people who quoted Highlife songs to explain their grievances and I lived in a family that was full of jealousy and witchcraft suspicions, the very topics of numerous Highlife songs that resounded from the radio in their house.

In the same way I read and checked the Highlife texts on the miserable orphan. I understand them as an expression of the fear of what Collins (1994:390) calls "the quintessential disaster that can befall a human being:" to be without close and caring family members. That anxiety is real for many, orphan or not, in the social and political reality of present-day Ghana, both in the city and in their hometown. When I asked Okyeame Opoku why Highlife singers paint such a gloomy picture of the life of orphans, he laughed and answered they had to exaggerate because they were Highlife performers. His down-to-earth comment was not very different from Yankah's (1984) and Barber's (1987) views on the anthropological use of song texts. Terms

like “deflection” and “transformation of reality” are used to point out the complexity of taking texts as ethnographic informants.

But why should Highlife artists transform, deflect or “exaggerate?” I suspect that Okyeame Opoku was mainly thinking of commercial interests: only songs that “move” us also move us to listen and to buy. But why do they move us? Because the plight of the orphan reminds us of Collins’ “quintessential disaster” which is a real possibility and—therefore—“rightful” anxiety of Ghanaians today and probably also many years ago. The orphan stands for loss of support and security. The Akan orphan looks like the deserted lover in the popular music of my own society, where relational anxiety is more threatening than material insecurity. This leads me back to Goudblom’s perspective on literary art as a continuation of the human experience, expressing hope, fear, and denial. That insight I derived from shuttling between text and context. Most of the text was outside the text.

Appendix: Highlife Songs on Orphans

- “Ade aye me” (African Brothers)
- “Agyanka due” (Rambler’s Dance Band)
- “Agyanka due” (Okukuseku No. 2)
- “Aka me nkoa” (African Brothers)
- “Aku Sika” (African Brothers)
- “Ankonam agyanka” (Doctor Gyasi’s Guitar band)
- “Ankonam mɔ̀bɔ̀ro agyanka” (All Brothers Band)
- “Awisia” (Nananom)
- “Awisia yi wo ani” (J.J.)
- “Egyanka ba” (Kakaiku’s Band)
- “Gyae su” (African Brothers)
- “Hini me” (African Brothers)
- “Mere wo beko asamen” (E.K. Nyame, 1955)
- “Mewɔ̀hɔ̀ yi” (African Brothers)
- “Obi abayewa” (African Brothers)
- “Obofo ye na” (Gay Brothers Band)
- “Obonto” (Akonoba J.K.’s Band)
- “Ofie nwansena” (African Brothers)
- “Oheneba” (Teacher and his Africana)
- “Onnibie asem ye mmɔ̀bɔ̀” (Gay Brothers Band)
- “Onuapa due o” (Akwaboah)
- “San behwe wo mma” (Doctor Gyasi’s Guitar band)

All bands except Rambler’s Dance Band are guitar bands.

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