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To cite this article: Eyram Dzitrie & Xorlali M. K. Agbemava (2021): Kasahare: Demystifying Rap Lyricism and Artistry in Ghana's Hiplife Music, Popular Music and Society, DOI: [10.1080/03007766.2021.1991173](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2021.1991173)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2021.1991173>



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Published online: 14 Nov 2021.



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Kasahare: Demystifying Rap Lyricism and Artistry in Ghana's Hiplife Music

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ABSTRACT

This article explores imaginative rap lyricism through Kasahare – a backbone of hiplife, a Ghanaian culture and entertainment staple since the 1990s – to understand its etymology, composition, and popularization, and examines excerpts of verses from three songs we consider archetypes of Kasahare released in the last 20 years, to evaluate its artistic and linguistic values. We complement our analysis with first-hand accounts and relevant contextual information gathered through personal interviews, and argue that Kasahare and its role in the preservation and promotion of Ghanaian sociocultural identities and local linguistic resources are imperative and need further study.

KEYWORDS

Ghana; hiplife; Culture; indigeneity; Kasahare; rap

Introduction

Music performs a wide variety of social, cognitive, and emotional functions (Hargreaves and North; Travis); recognizing its multidimensional role, *The Cultural Policy of Ghana* states, “[t]he practice, creation and promotion of all forms of Ghanaian Music shall be encouraged by the State” (31). Among Ghanaian audiences, music tends to contribute to maximizing life satisfaction and well-being (Carl and Kutsidzo). Previously published estimates indicate that the music sector in Ghana employs about 30,000 people including approximately 4,000 professional musicians (representing 13.5 percent) and covers about six broad categories of music: traditional, contemporary, gospel, imported, choral, and brass band (KPMG). The contemporary music category includes the genre hiplife, which emerged close to three decades ago and has, over the years, become one of the most produced and listened-to genres (Collins, “Contemporary”; KPMG).

Hiplife¹ – which we describe broadly as a Ghanaian musical synthesis mainly comprising culturally influenced rap verses and/or hip hop (or other electronic) beats, often blended with original or sampled Ghanaian highlife or (neo-)traditional music rhythms, lyrics, or compositions – is a portmanteau of “hip hop” and “highlife,” popular genres of music developed in the USA (specifically, the Bronx, New York) and West Africa, notably, Ghana (specifically, the southern regions), respectively (Collins, “Early History”; Keyes). Some of its lyrics and literary elements are in the form of Kasahare, a

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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vernacular moniker referring to the variety of intricate and innovative rap styles, which, among other things, draw inspiration from the indigenous diction and poetic oratory usually found in the preexisting traditions and customs of Akan and other ethnic groups in Ghana.

Rhymes, cadences, wordplay, and double entendres are common in Kasahare; however, what makes it both intriguing and indispensable to hiplife in particular and Ghanaian music in general is its adept use of embedded proverbs, idioms, and imagery of the local milieu – sometimes in combination with Ghanaian folklore and satire – as a musical technique to offer insightful social commentary and showcase superior lyrical ability. While it has played an important role in mainstream music since gaining a strong footing in the late 1990s, Kasahare – its anatomy and usage in Ghanaian contemporary hiplife music – remains relatively understudied. Overall, the literature on hiplife has been growing steadily since 2009, but documented information on Kasahare is scarcer. To the best of our knowledge, no scholarly paper focusing entirely on the identity of Kasahare and its relationship with hiplife in Ghana had been published at the time of conducting this investigation, and closing this huge knowledge gap served as one of the motivations for carrying out this piece of analytical research.

Furthermore, Kasahare is of prime interest in this article because of its dual importance: its indigeneity and (multipurpose) utility. Through processes of cultural diffusion, Kasahare has leveraged primordial oration and storytelling, albeit with slight modifications in its modern manifestation and application in the contemporary sound arts. Likewise, beyond captivating lyrics, and in applying its didactic and social responsibility functions, it has also been used to draw attention to issues of present concern in Ghana, including corruption and moral decadence. Kasahare has become a viable intertemporal medium that has the potential to ensure a continuous cultural mediation between past, present, and future generations – exemplifying the “concept of *Sankofa*” (*Cultural Policy* 9); it guarantees a level of quality assurance and ingenuity in the hiplife music space even in the face of demographic changes and shifts in the Ghanaian and international musical landscape.

This article is divided into three main parts. After a synopsis of what Kasahare means as an essential part of hiplife in the Ghanaian society, we briefly discuss the representation of traditional concepts in popular music, which is a common practice in many sub-Saharan African countries. Thereafter, we explore Kasahare’s key musical attributes, which we examine through a lyrical content analysis of excerpts from three songs: “Ako” (War) by Obrafuor, released in 2006, “The Workshop” performed by [Okra Tom Dawidi](#) and Motia, released a year before, and “Kae Kwabena” (Remember Kwabena) by [Pure AkAN](#), released in 2017. Finally, the article highlights some of the major contributors to the art form’s enduring role.

The research methodology included a review of existing literature on hiplife and related music genres, and interviews conducted with several experienced music industry professionals: artists, music producers, and radio presenters closely involved in Ghana’s hiplife music, and academics. In addition, an assortment of 250 hiplife songs released since 1996 was compiled and reviewed, of which the aforementioned songs were purposively sampled and included in the analysis. In the absence of a properly centralized and up-to-date hiplife music public database, songs were accessed from a variety of sources: personal music libraries, online web portals (e.g. [ghanaplaylist.com](#)), and curated songs

nominated in the annual Vodafone Ghana Music Awards (VGMA) categories or that were part of Accra-based radio station, Hitz 103.9 FM's #Top100HiplifeSongs aired on the station's Musik Box entertainment show in September 2016.

Kasahare: Etymology and Significance

...
 Mebaayɛ a, ɛnyɛ bone
 Efutuo, nkɔmɔdɛ ɛni kɔkɔbɔ nti na menam
 ɛni sɛn?
 ɛnamafoɔ di nnwom foforo –
 a Obroni frɛ no rap
 a Mpaninfoɔ ato ne din Kasahare –
 aba Ghana
 Amanfoɔ, edwuma no so
 ehia ɔboafɔɔ
 ɔbrafoɔ, masom

...
 I arrived not with bad intentions
 but to provide good counsel, engage in delightful conversations, and be a voice of reason
 The rationale for this?
 The present generation has brought a new kind of music –
 Which White people refer to as rap
 And our Elders have named Kasahare –
 to Ghana
 People, the task ahead is huge
 It requires one with the ability to help elevate it
 Obrafuor, I embrace this responsibility

(permission for lyrics granted courtesy of Obrafuor)

This early reference to Kasahare in a hiplife song appears on “Intro,” the first of 10 songs on Obrafuor’s 1999 magnum opus *Pae Mu Ka* [State It as It Is]. In the song, Obrafuor notes that rap music, which had been on the rise in Ghana, had come to be redefined locally as Kasahare – a compound word coined from the merging of the Akan words “Kasa” (language) and “Hare” (fast paced). A few linguistic scholars have shared their views on the word’s meaning, and these perspectives are instructive. In his study on hybridized lexical phrases invented with words from Ghanaian languages and English, [Ngula](#) cited several examples including “kasahar[e] night” (189), which he construed as a soiree of rap music. [Agyekum](#) agrees and explains that “Kasahare is an appropriate local term for rap music because of the quick sequence in which the words in a verse are uttered,” adding that “in the Akan language, another phrase that is closely related in meaning is *Tekremaworo nnwom*, that is, tongue-twisting music. *Tekremaworosem* refers to tongue-twisters and the verb *woro* means to roll or skip over some items” (Personal communication).

Several other artists have spoken about Kasahare or, at least, referenced the term in their songs. In an [interview](#) (conducted in Twi²) in 2018, while responding to a question on the brand of Ghanaian music he considers himself to be most associated with, Okomfuor Kwadε – who is known for his storytelling, among other musical abilities – stated (as translated in English), “If analyzed properly, with respect to my style of music, I would say that I do Kasahare [which involves] poems or literature.” This statement mirrors Kasahare’s underlying “form-content” dyad, in which, ideally, rap is not only employed stylistically and with gravitas but in a way that ensures that the subject matter being addressed in the song or lyric is topical, thought-provoking, or poetic (as we demonstrate later).

The emergence of hiplife, of which Kasahare is elemental, was preceded by a combination of paradigmatic shifts in Ghanaian highlife music-making practices and concurrent foreign musical influences in the late 1980s ([Collins](#), “Generational Factor”). Geopolitical changes in Ghana led to the landmark liberalization of the airwaves in 1995, and this coincided with the advent of the new hiplife movement, providing impetus for its future expansion ([Salm and Falola](#); [Shipley](#), *Living*). New musical groups such as Talking Drums and the Native Funk Lords (NFL) had emerged in the early and mid-1990s and went on to release (mainly English and Pidgin English) rap songs which reflected their Ghanaian roots and cosmopolitan influences (see for example, Talking Drums’ 1993 song, “Aden” [Why?]) ([Shipley](#), *Birth*; [Goldsmith and Fonseca](#)). Mahoney-P, who was domiciled in the Netherlands, released an album entitled *Highlife in Gangsterdam*, which many analysts believe to be one of the first, if not the first, successful litmus test(s) wherein a published album featured songs with multiple rap verses and choruses in Ghanaian dialects. Reggie Rockstone³ recorded the chant-worthy anthem “Tsoo Boi!” which is credited as the first song mentioning the term “hiplife” ([Shipley](#), “Aesthetic”), and appears on both his 1996 extended play (EP) record and *Makaa Makaa!! [I Said It, So There!!]*, his debut album.

These groundbreaking projects became significant in paving the way for the plethora of critically acclaimed hiplife songs and albums from a “new school of lyrical rappers – including Obrafuo[r] (the Executioner)” at the turn of the millennium ([Kwaku](#) 37). In analyzing rap’s western influence on the state of popular music in Ghana between the early- and mid-1990s, [Wright](#) observed that “[m]ost of the popular artists [we]re American (and occasionally British) though some Ghanaians [we]re beginning to pick up Funk and Rap’s style and incorporate it into their Highlife songs – diluting ‘pure’ Highlife even more” (17). Ghanaian radio presenter, MC, and musician, [Sammi B](#), also recalls the artistic innovations in Ghanaian rap music which were being introduced and contributed to a groundswell among the public:

If you trace it back to when GBC and [others] were the few stations operating, presenters were playing a lot of Highlife until a couple of dilutions came in, so now the Highlife had some remixes which featured a new breed of musicians who were coming onto the scene—much younger with a little bit of foreign musical influence doing dancehall and rap itself. Some of the rap in the early stages were in English mixed with some form of pidgin Then it got to a point when we started having a new identity of rap music which was different from what we had from remixes of original Highlife tracks. This was more distinct . . . the diction was very local, exciting, and well strung together, and the verses incorporated

traditional themes, proverbs, and stories that were folkloric. The first time I heard Obrafuor rap, immediately I could tell his style would go far because he had a lot of material to tap into—from the kind of stories he was telling. You could also tell that he was unique because of his eloquence. He sounded like someone who knew what he was speaking about because the lyrics were on point . . . in comparison, I could even say that Obrafuor was like the [Mensa] Otabil of hiplife; you'd listen to him . . . because he always had a message in his music.

The competitive traits of rap extend to Kasahare, and lyrics are usually expected to be cerebral, going above and beyond “the basics, because that’s not ear catching – [more basic rhymes] don’t catch the [listener’s] ear like that” (Kool G Rap, qtd. in [Edwards](#) 88). [Price-Styles](#) argues, “[m]any factors can be attributed to rap flourishing, as increased participation and a need to carve out one’s own distinct voice or niche, coupled with hip-hop’s intrinsic competitiveness, pushed the attention paid to form and creative intent” (14). Sharing insights on his own writing process, Obrafuor explains his fondness for harnessing the richness and functionality of different forms of text, with the aim of crafting deeply evocative lyrics which his audiences can relate to

I try to rearrange words to sound new every time I create. A lot of thought goes into choosing my words, probably it’s a word that has been used over and over again but the way and manner I will use it, it will . . . get a new feel. . . . [I] make sure my words are clean and strike a chord with the people. (qtd. in [Abdullahi](#))

Like other rap-based art forms, Kasahare is performed and listened to mainly by young people of different ages and backgrounds. Besides its congeniality, entertainment potential and commercial viability ([Charry](#)), Kasahare’s fundamental value comes from being adaptable to homegrown musical sensibilities and styles, and gaining a reputation for being a voice through which locally ascribed narratives are interpreted and amplified. As [Cho](#) succinctly put it while characterizing hiplife as a force for social change in Ghana, the music is in many respects “a show of youths’ individual and group agency in relation to urbanization, the globalization of popular culture and exclusion from the adult public” (407).

Performing in native languages can play a unifying role helping to engender a strong degree of interconnectedness across different locales in the homeland and the diaspora; but also, importantly, it can allow artists – many of whom have adopted local stage names – to become executants aiding the decolonization of popular music to safeguard the much cherished local cultural heritage ([Charry](#)). As such, when it comes to Kasahare, most rap verses are performed in widely spoken Akan dialects (including Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, and Fanti), although codeswitching, which incorporates phrases, jargon, and borrowed words from other languages spoken in Ghana (such as Ga, Ewe, Hausa, and Pidgin English), is not a rarity. Codeswitching has not only been used to demonstrate an artist’s polyglottism and ability to reach out to more diverse audiences, but to achieve certain aesthetic effects such as clever wordplay ([Quarcoo, Amuzu, and Owusu](#)). In many of his verses in the Asante Twi dialect, rapper Paa Dogo, for example, incorporates Ewe language phraseology. Obrafuor and Prince Bright (one of the members of the hiplife music group Buk Bak) both blend four different languages in their songs “Yaanom” (Folks) and “Kakatsofa” (Ginger), respectively, and a different version of [Okra Tom Dawidi](#)’s song “Ayekoo” (Kudos), which features rapper Pope Skinny, fuses words from the Asante Twi, Akuapem Twi, Ewe, Ga, and English languages.

The Use of Traditional Concepts and Rhythms in African Popular Music

In this section, we briefly review the conceptualizations and application of African “traditional” and “neo-traditional” codes and practices in music (focusing mostly on Ghana), which *Agawu* describes in terms of “deep associations with the core institutions of precolonial society” and “a self-conscious renewal of tradition” (*Representing* 123), respectively. Oral tradition and persuasive speech are still highly regarded in many West African societies (*Yankah, Speaking*), which partly explains the recurrent use of these devices in the popular music genres in many of these cultures. The use of traditional forms of allegorical and indirect speech incorporating proverbs and metaphor in highlife music from Ghana, and Afrobeat music popularized by Nigeria’s Fela Kuti is well documented (*Agawu, Representing; Agyekum, “Proverbs”; Labinjoh*). Proverbs, in particular, have a special significance in Ghanaian language-based communication, and importantly, among the Akan ethnic groups, demonstrate an advanced proficiency in formal speech techniques (*Yankah, “Proverbs”, Yankah, “Oratory”*).

As part of its evolution to date, rap music in sub-Saharan African countries has necessitated the revitalization and assimilation of these long-established local traditions (*Charry*). Colloquialisms, catchphrases, and local slang feature prominently in Kasahare lyrics; however, many Ghanaian rap artists have over time learned to dovetail these linguistic elements with “high doses of poetic imagining” and proverbial speech (*Agawu, African Imagination* 146; *Shipley, Birth*), making rhymes and story plots in hiplife songs elaborate. In Senegal, contemporary popular music art forms such as mbalax and rap-based Galsen have incorporated, or often been compared to, traditional griot oral performances such as “taasú.” *Neff* indicates “griots have for millennia recited improvised and memorized verses over the rhythms of talking drums for the purposes of life-cycle ritual, diplomacy, and battle. These traditions of eloquence set the stage for contemporary hip-hop styles” (271). *Tang* affirms this, stating, “[b]y invoking griotness, Senegalese hip hop artists construct a complex, new Africanized identity that draws upon American rap but then gains greater legitimacy through its roots in a historic African tradition. They then reclaim this tradition as their own, having the best of both worlds” (90).

Kautny points to the beat as a distinguishing characteristic between “written poems” and “rhymed lyrics” and argues that, “nothing can be said about the position of rhymes without considering their overall rhythmic context as given by the beat” (103). Rhythms and instrument sounds are multifarious in hiplife music – gravitating toward (neo-) traditional rhythms, highlife, and hip hop – and have become a marker of the genre. *Yaw Anoff*, who joined forces with celebrated music producer Hammer (aka Hammer of the Last Two) to co-produce and record *Pae Mu Ka* with support from a team, reflects on the amalgamation of indigenous and foreign sounds in the creation of the beats for the album which at the time was still a novelty:

The beats were born of multiple elements, but the sonic result was an unlikely hybrid. There was a natural continuity in the sound because we produced the entire album. All the beats were inspired by our real lives, including all the different music we had cherished growing up. We discovered that we’d been raised on some of the same songs which naturally shaped our aural perceptions.

Two well-known (neo-)traditional Ghanaian rhythms that have often been incorporated in the production of hiplife songs are *Adowa* and *Jama*,⁴ which arguably helped to reshape the initially pessimistic views about hiplife and present it as homegrown music. Known for its elegant dance presentations, *Adowa* is performed by the Akan ethnic groups during important events, including festivals and funerals, and involves singing amidst “specific drum rhythms while gong patterns control body movements like spins and bows” (Salm and Falola 177; Akrong). *Jama*, like *Kpanlogo*, is a drum and dance piece performed commonly by the Ga people during social functions, and is also popular as an adopted brand of local cheerleading music. It primarily involves recurring hand-claps, bell patterns, and drum rhythms from percussion instruments such as the tamalin and conga (Ash-Morgan). Highlighting the need to continuously promote the appropriate use (and re-use) of traditional forms of music where possible, Nketia observed that

African composers are ... becoming increasingly conscious of the value of their own traditional music as a creative element in their compositions. ... It is likely that with increasing knowledge of their own musical heritage neglected in their education during the colonial era, African composers will move slowly ... from a predominantly Western approach towards the development of an African style of composition which will reflect the heritage of the past. This development will show itself in the exploitation of the rhythmic and melodic features of African traditional music, in the use of rhythm patterns developed in drumming and other forms of instrumental music ... in the use of traditional tunes in composition, in the treatment of words and melody, and in the use of traditional music instruments where this is possible. ... While the new African style of composition will not be the same as traditional African music as we know it today, it will nevertheless continue to share a number of common features with it. (37)

These deliberate efforts to reposition popular music in many African countries fit perfectly within a much broader praxis of enculturation, which according to Shimahara entails an acquisition of “traditional as well as ... novel features of culture” (144). Older generations tended to distance themselves from rap music, largely because of the structure and content of songs. In a comprehensive study on Ghanaian music, Collins stated that, many of the older Ghanaian generation “complain, that hiplife lyrics are too hurried (*kasa hare*) to be deciphered” (“Popular Performance” 207). However, these views have begun to change slowly with the incorporation of traditional performances in popular songs, as witnessed, for example, from Obrafuor’s creative use of traditional speech styles – commonly associated with the offering of libation in remembrance of the ancestors – in the lyrics of “Kwame Nkrumah,” another song on his *Pae Mu Ka* album (Shiple, *Living*; Odamtten). Symbolizing a gradual passing of the torch, this can allow younger generations to make even greater use of these frames of reference in newer settings and take them along into the future.

Kasahare: Lyrical Content Analysis

Using the following examples, we now analyze excerpts of the lyrics of songs (providing the original Akan language version, followed by English translations) which showcase the linguistic and innovative properties of Kasahare.

Example 1 — Obrafuor: “Ako”

Like most rap songs, this track follows, to a reasonable extent, this oft-used structure: intro-chorus-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-outro. The beat has a hip-hop feel, which flows originally with all its identifiable elements in place and includes foreign inputs such as the trumpet, acoustic and electric guitars, kick, and harp, accompanied by local inputs such as the shaker and conga. In the excerpt below, we see examples of Obrafuor’s usage of proverbs and figurative speech in his verses:

Se w’aduane anso wo di a
 ɛna wo tekrema kɔ wo dodo mu atwee
 Patapaasem nti, n’adwene ɛyɛ no sɛ deɛ nkwadaa bi bɔ no, K
 Suntidua no deɛ ebɛba o
 Na deɛ enam no so bɛba no deɛ, ...
 Wonim papa a, wonim bɔne
 Barima, ɛnne, *obi nkyere akwadaa Nyame*
 Edwuma yi te sɛ nyansa akwantuo
 Yekɔ no adwene, yɛnkɔ no abrane

...

Wobɔ me din, na Rap Sɔfoɔ nka ho a
 Ɛte sɛ deɛ woasa “Akapoma” na woandwa mu
 Etire bi so, etire bi sua
 Etire, etire biara nso ne adwene a ɛda mu

...

Kasahare, ɔsɔfoɔ, magye m’ahenkyɛ

...

Deɛ ɔwoso adɔtɔ no, ɔnsuro akorokra
Se ye wo wo sɛ bekum ɔsono a, wonprepre wo ho wɔ kusie ho nkɔ pra

...

Yɛse ɔpanin dware wie a, na asuo asa

...

If you are left unsatisfied after eating
 That is when your tongue goes to intrude into other areas of your mouth
 Because they like to bully others, they think they are in a fight with some kids
 There will be repercussions
 But they will come to whoever brings a curse onto another
 If you know the good, you must know the bad
 Man, nowadays, *no one shows a child who God is*
 This task is just like a journey for the wise
 It requires wit, not brute force

...

If you mention my name without adding (my appellation) Rap Reverend
 It’s like doing the “Akapoma” cultural dance without performing its gestures to the fullest
 Some heads are big, others are small
 But every head has a unique brain inside

...
Rap, Preacher, I have taken my crown

...
*One who causes a thicket to shake (venturing into it) doesn't fear the wetness from its leaves
If you are born to hunt an elephant, you do not rush to pursue a rat and get injured instead*

...
It is said, *when an elderly person has finished having a bath, no water is left (for another to use)*

...

In lines six and seven of the excerpts provided above, Obrafuor speaks about value judgments, knowing right from wrong, and having an awareness right from one's formative years. He then establishes, using a person's head as a metaphor, that although we are all not equal – large or small – we all have a purpose. As a way of demonstrating self-worth and assertiveness, he talks about wearing the crown – a metaphor to say he is the best when it comes to Kasahare. In line 15, he offers a proverb about not being rattled by minor obstacles when one is known for achieving great feats while the penultimate line, another proverb, talks about priorities and picking one's battles carefully. The last line (a proverb) is another way of saying that when the eldest or most senior person takes their turn to speak, they bring finality to a conversation by having the last word. As seen in the excerpt below, part of the refrain cautions against conceit.

...

Wotwi ahenfie kaa a, na enkyerε se woye ɔdehyee

If you drive a vehicle belonging to the royal palace, it does not mean that you are a royal.

(permission for lyrics granted courtesy of Obrafuor)

Example 2 — Okra Tom Dawidi and Motia: “The Workshop”

This song, a collaborative effort of rap artists, [Okra Tom Dawidi](#) and [Motia](#), blends elements of an edifying storytelling style somewhat in the form of “Anansesem” (Akan folklore often centering on the adventures of *Ananse*, the Spider, and akin to Aesop's fables) with multisyllabic rhymes and bravado-filled speech.

Atta Kwame dan, nkurasefoɔ agyenkwa,
Motia the beast master, wagye nkya
Ayere se benta, mmoadoma nana
ɔtam wo kɔ a, wadane ne nsa mu akoo,
edeɛn paa ara na wowɔ ka?
watwa kanko mframa (mframa)
wodi amia, asamando ne wo gyinabea

Kronkron, amansan montie,
nea Honhom no wɔ ka kyere Asafo no nie
mabɔ no toa, dwatire
wotie na eyɛ wo de a wotumi wia kɔ wo fie

nka enye nkusie yonko ne nwisie (daabi da),
 Odasani a ompɛ ade pa, bayie,
 omma no nya ahotɔ koraa na wanya anigye (anigye)
 enne wahyia motia afidie,
 wawura mu, ogye ne ho a enye yie (enye yie)

Nea ani behunu biara no ewɔ sɛ adwene fa,
 ena nea aso bete no ewɔ sɛ ano ka.
 Okra mebɔ wa koraa a, w'ani tua,
 no doubtu, nkura nyinaa scatter,

...

Kasahare mu nkwadaa, menyɛ nketewa,

...

Wotwe wo mu tan koraa a me di wo kan (me di mo kan) . . .
Obi nfa (ne nsa) benkum nkyere n'agya kurom kwan (daabi da).

...

Wotwa ɔwɔ ti firi so a, deɛ aka ye ahoma
Yebu wo kwasia nso edikan a wonnye kwasia,
 so etɔ so mprenu a wosene bi koraa.

...

In mud houses, rural dwellers find sanctuary
 Motia (the dwarf), the beast master, receives greetings,
 It has become a dire situation, (this is) the king of all animals
 If he carries you away, you become enslaved to him,
 what can you possibly say in protest then?
 Announcing his presence with a whirlwind (a gust of wind),
 you could be doomed, and that will be your end

Holy [words], everyone should listen
 This is the message the spirit has for the people
 I have summarized it, a treasure
 If you enjoy what you hear, you are at liberty to steal it
 Indeed, smoke is no ally amongst a horde of rats (never)
 A person who hates good [conversely does] evil
 They would not let others have their comfort, let alone their happiness
 Today, you have encountered the dwarf's trap
 Entangled, they are unable to set themselves free

So, whatever the eyes see, the mind should reflect upon
 And whatever the ears hear, the mouth should voice
 Even when the cat coughs, you already know,
 no doubt, all mice scatter

...

To the kids in the rap game, I'm not insignificant

...

No matter what you do, I am still ahead of you (ahead of you) . . .

One does not use the left hand to point out (the path to) their father's hometown (never)

...

When you cut a snake's head off, what is left of it is a cord

If you are fooled the first time, you are not regarded a fool

But when it happens a second time, you are more than one

(permission for use of lyrics granted courtesy of Emmanuel Ralph Kotei Nikoi, A.K.A. [Okra Tom Dawidi](#), and Joseph Assiamah)

In pendulum-like fashion, rap verses are delivered uninterrupted following a brief opening dialogue between the two emcees and with a vigorosity underscored by recurring sonorous clanks and the absence of a chorus. Like “Ako,” key themes in the song revolve around cautiousness, consciousness, honor, respect, gratitude, and invincibility. Metaphors are used widely in the verses. For example, the word “*dwatire*” (one’s riches or treasure), used in line 10, is meant to symbolize how valuable the message being relayed is. Line 11 adds that these “pearls of wisdom” are so precious that people might be tempted to steal them. In lines 19 and 20, we can see an example of clever wordplay through codeswitching where Akan and English words are combined nicely to provide an illustration of the cat-mice rivalry as part of the narration. Italicized proverbs and adages are presented almost exactly in the original formats; in addition, line 24 is a pun made out of the proverb, *ɔwɔ te sɛ ahoma, na yɛnfa nkyekyere adeɛ*, which means, “a (live) snake resembles a cord, but it is not used for tying things up.”

Phonetic mannerisms are rife in Kasahare and have been used wittingly as a signature or style, or to inject humor. In this song, for instance, we see the use of what could be considered a “consonant substitution technique” where a different consonant is (used or) perceived to be used in place of the original in the pronunciation of a word, thereby producing an auditory illusion without changing the word’s meaning.⁵ Examples include “Kronkron” (where one “r” sounds like “n”), and Kasahare (where “r” sounds like “d”).

Example 3 — Pure Akan: “Kae Kwabena”

In an in-depth study of a song composed by a well-known Akan oral artist, [Agyekum](#) examines the adroit use of proverbial expressions, historical allusions, and linguistic parallelisms, which are “aesthetically woven to promote the song’s communicative functions” (“An Akan” 10). With a hip-hop beat, this introspective song by [Pure AkAN](#) focuses broadly on spirituality, and draws attention to sub-motifs such as salvation, sin, human suffering, faith, and hope. From the translated excerpts below, we can see the text is punctuated with the above-mentioned literary devices. Part of the seventh line (italicized), for example, is a proverb and can be interpreted to mean that repentance from a life of sin is an individual’s obligation. Lines 15 to 16 (including the italicized proverb) are an acknowledgment that while the speaker wishes to lead a life worthy of emulation, as reflected in the ninth line, these good intentions alone are not enough, and because of his imperfection as a human being, some of his actions may still attract criticism or need to be assessed from alternative positions:

...

Me mpaebɔ nyinaa ne sɛ Neɛ ɔhata soro yi behu me mɔbo
 Ɔnhwe m'anamɔntuo ne me bɔne ho nfa nbua me fɔ

...

Metwa m'ani kɔ hwe neɛ sika nti mede me kra atwa soɔ,
 Asaase so anigye, asaase so anigye a ɛnfa nipa nkɔsi hwee
 na medi me mmerɛ ne makoma ahwehwe

...

Madane bɔne akoo,
 Nanso *obi nnom aduro ma yarefoɔ*, ɛnodeɛ nokore
 nti mɛbɔ mɔden na Agya no ba a mankoɣe ɔyeraba.

...

M'anisoadehunu nyinaa ne sɛ medane ɔkannifoɔ
 Mɛbɔ me bra yie na mato m'akwan ama mmɔfra adi so
 Na mɛpɔn kɔ fie a mɛtumi ada yie
 na akyire mma ba so a wɔatia m'anamɔn mu ama wɔn deɛ akɔ so

...

Mɛbue neɛ ɔretie me ani wɔ ɛyaw ne ehu mu na wɔagye wɔn ho adi,
 ma wɔatwe wɔn ho afiri ɛyaw ne ehu mu.
 Nanso *neɛ ɔretwa kwan nnim sɛ n'akyi akyea*,
 Makɔɣe nipa yi deɛ meho bɛtɔ kyema kakra,

...

My solemn prayer is that God in Heaven will be merciful to me,
 and not look at my . . . sins when I am judged,

...

When I look back at what I've done because of money
 and worldly pleasures, worldly pleasures which are ultimately unbeneficial
 and which I devoted my time and heart in search of

...

I am a slave to sin,
 but *no one else takes (a sick person's) medicine for the sick (to heal)*, that is the truth,
 so, I will do my best (to repent) so that I won't be lost when God comes,

...

My goal is to be a leader,
 lead a righteous life and pave the way for children,
 So that when I leave this earth, I can have peaceful rest,
 And when new generations come, they will follow in my footsteps to excel

...

I will urge those listening to me to have self-belief despite their pain and fear,
 so that they come away from their misery,
 But *one who constructs a (straight) footpath may not realize the trail left behind is crooked*,
 So far as I am human, I am fallible

...

Also noteworthy are parts of the bridges of the song (below). The line is an allusion which makes biblical references to the first sins, following God's creation of the world.

Adee yi yawo me ato bone mu, monhwɛ sɛ Adam adi ne bone na metua ho ka,
I was born a sinner, just imagine I am paying for the sins of Adam.

Juxtaposing the line below, which is also taken from the song's bridges, with one of the lines of his second verse ("So far as I am human, I am fallible"), we can see [Pure AkAN's](#) use of parallelism in the song.

nanso makɔyɛ nipa yi deɛ, menya no tɔtɛe

But being human, I am likely to make mistakes

(permission for use of lyrics granted courtesy of Bernard Nana Appiah, A.K.A. Pure AkAN, and David Ashford Baafi Agyei)

Popularization and Legacy

Many factors have served as catalysts behind the popularity and sustainability of Kasahare, including particularly, trailblazing studio-recorded albums from artists who took the art form to new heights, early compilation albums, and entertainment programs broadcast via radio, television, or the internet. *Pae Mu Ka's* instrumental role in elevating Ghanaian rap lyricism and its intelligent use of traditional performance cannot be overestimated. This huge milestone contributed to the acceptance of the genre, in the process making it a model for hiplife rap albums, and helped create "an opening for other hiplife musicians to project their music to an audience that [was] now keener to listen" (Cho 411). Among the several notable Ghanaian artists who have shared their views on its impact and seminal role, [Okra Tom Dawidi](#), who gained fame as a lyricist, credits the album as a source of inspiration in his musical pursuit, stating,

That was the album that made me fall in love with hiplife. When it comes to the *Pae Mu Ka* album, from "Intro" [the first song] to "Outro" [the last song], they are all creative masterpieces. And during that time, the album was being played everywhere. A tribute song to Kwame Nkrumah, [then there was] "Yaanom" . . . the one with Cy Lover [too] —"Agorɔ No Asɔ", and [the posse cut] "Ma Mendwen Meho." . . . That album still ranks as many people's favorite.

[Pure AkAN](#), who recently released his second album, poetry-filled *Nyame Mma*, and is viewed by many as one of Ghanaian hiplife music's true purists today, shared,

Pae Mu Ka was the "it" album for me, right from my first listen. I even remember how my friends and I had to save money to buy the cassette. It was the album that I could connect with and sing along to, especially since he was rapping in Twi. It was refreshing and new at the time it came out. It is definitely a great album and has and continues to inspire people including me. The album influenced the sound of the time and even the way people listened to music because the lyricism on that album was truly sublime and after it came out, everything changed. My first public performance was a rendition of "Yaanom" at a friend's birthday party. I started rapping in Twi because *Pae Mu Ka* proved that it could be done at such a high level and the album opened an avenue for me to explore music and express myself boldly through rap.

Rapper Yaw Grey (qtd. in [Shipley, *Living*](#)) had previously talked about the crucial contributions of both Reggie Rockstone and Obrafuor to the growth of hiplife. He comments that

Reggie was the first one to really make the music . . . popular. He showed us . . . that we could do what they were doing up there [in America] . . . but there was this Western style in [Reggie's music]. Many of [us] were not too good in that Western style. . . . Obrafuor . . . showed us that we too could enter this game, the typical youth could make it. . . . He raps in pure, typical Twi filled with . . . proverbs. He brings in the authentic Ghanaian culture. (121)

The practice of producing song collections in the form of compilation albums is not a new one ([Wikström and Burnett](#)). Compared to highlife and hip hop, however, the formal release of major compilation albums was uncharted territory for hiplife until the early 2000s. Timeless highlife compilation albums that featured compositions by different artists were produced as far back as Ghana's immediate post-independence era, the 1960s. *Stars of Ghana*, for example, was released by the Decca Music Group circa 1962 and featured songs from the Black Beats Band, E. T. Mensah & the Tempos, and Onyina's Guitar Band among other legendary Ghanaian highlife bands. In a similar fashion, early classic US hip-hop compilation albums were released in the 1980s, including *Wild Style Original Soundtrack* (1983) and DJ Marley Marl's *In Control Vol 1* (1988). The trend of making mainstream compilation albums which featured hiplife songs was introduced and nurtured mainly by specific Ghanaian record houses and music imprints established in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁶ The recording of *Jay Q's Platinum Compilation* by music producer Jay Q's Q-Lex Entertainment label in 2003 ([Doku 9](#)) added to the attention the new wave of (*Jama*-inspired) hiplife songs was getting, and *The Execution Diary*, which was released by Obrafuor's Execution Entertainment label in 2004 gained critical acclaim for its suspense-filled lyrical content – both helping to break new ground not just in terms of creating an alternative for hiplife music releases but as an entrée into music for new generations of Ghanaian rap artists. Hammer's equally praiseworthy album, *Sounds of Our Time*, followed some months later ([Antwi 6](#)) – and together with *The Execution Diary*, both albums showcased the talents of many new rap artists of that era such as Kwaw Kese. Replicating his earlier feat, Hammer released another compilation album *The Crusade of the Lost Files* through his record label The Last Two Music Group in 2006, which introduced more new artists, including Volta Regime Music Group rapper Edem, to the Ghanaian audience. This medium not only became a precursor to the release of highly anticipated solo albums from hiplife's best upcoming (or “underground”) talents, but it also had the added advantage wherein these artists were groomed for a period to ensure they were ready for the music market.

As noted in the earlier sections of this article, the demonopolization of radio operations in Ghana was a significant step toward greater media freedom, further consolidating the democratic transition taking place in the country, after years of checkered rule by civilian governments and military juntas. In comparison to other mass media in Ghana (*Ghana Demographic*),⁷ radio has been one of the most pivotal communication channels through which music has become more widely accessible. While several radio, television, and online entertainment programs have been produced over the years, among the few shows dedicated to the promotion of Ghanaian lyricism is *Kasahare Level*, one of the longest-running youth-focused radio shows in the country. First hosted by presenter Dr.

Duncan, it is a three-hour entertainment program, which has aired each weekend on Tema-based Adom FM's frequency (106.3 MHz) since 2001 (Duncan-Williams). The show has hosted hundreds of upcoming and established musicians mainly doing Kasahare (and hiplife music, in general); some of these musicians were also well known for being part of the burgeoning rap culture in the Tema metropolis and nearby urban districts between 2005 and 2010, including Dr. Cryme, and multiple award-winning rapper Sarkodie. The format of the show primarily involves live lyrical freestyle contests (friendly rap battles), after which listeners make calls to the show in real time to vote for their favorite performance. Public participation, a relaxed ambiance, and skillful moderation by the show hosts demonstrate why the program has had a huge diverse listenership from its outset.

Conclusion

Conversations about music often help glean a diagnosis of specific genres and suggestions on how to advance them. Kasahare and by extension, hiplife music, can be associated with the emergence of what Nketia describes as “a new style of African composition within the general idioms of popular and fine art music [which is] not meant to replace traditional music . . . but to supplement it – to co-exist with it as different forms of music for different kinds of situations” (36). With the benefit of over a quarter of a century's worth of Ghana's hiplife music, we have delved into the artistic advancements brought on by rap artists in Ghana leveraging traditional oral performance, local languages, and indigenous rhythms, to situate Kasahare as a cultural asset created and mediated primarily by young Ghanaian generations. We have also touched on the use of traditional concepts in African popular music, highlighting specific examples where this has been done successfully.

In our interpretation of Kasahare as rap lyricism in the Ghanaian context, we have analyzed excerpts of three exemplary songs – “Ako,” “The Workshop,” and “Kae Kwabena” – identifying their artistic and linguistic hallmarks (e.g. codeswitching, puns, proverbs, metaphors, folklore, phonetic mannerisms, allusions, and parallelism). This article has also demonstrated how Kasahare offers dynamism in hiplife, through iconic albums such as Obrafuor's *Pae Mu Ka*, classic compilation albums, and entertainment programs such as Adom FM's Kasahare Level, which have served as aquifers of this art form. Although the rate at which compilation albums in hiplife were being produced in the early- and mid-2000s seems to have slowed, recent projects, such as record producer JMJ's *Riddim of the gOds*⁸ (hip hop/rap version), have rekindled an interest in this medium (Dzokpo). Songs such as Sarkodie's “Biibi Ba” (Something is approaching), which was released in 2018 and featured multiple upcoming artists at the time, have also sought to provide some level of talent visibility. While sonic shifts continue to occur, rap lyricism in Ghana is still alive, with artists such as Eno Barony, Strongman, *Pure AkAN*, and Obibini among its current torchbearers. Evidently, Kasahare offers a continuous intergenerational cultural mediation in Ghana, among other things, that is scholarship-worthy, necessitating further ethnomusicological research on this art form.

Notes

1. Other researchers have also tried to unpack hiplife. Collins defined it as “a Ghanaian vernacular language form of rap that has its origins in Jamaican ragga and particularly American hip-hop” (“Social History” 28) while Shipley summed it up as Ghanaian music that “combines hip hop sampling, scratching, and rap lyricism with older forms of highlife popular music, traditional storytelling, and formal proverbial oratory” (“Aesthetic” 631). Hiplife has also been referred to as a “hybrid genre” and “hip-hop in the Ghanaian local dialect backed by elements of the traditional Highlife” (KPMG 40).
2. Twi is a set of dialects of the Akan people in Ghana.
3. Reggie Rockstone is widely regarded as a leading light and the “Godfather of hiplife music,” and has been one of the main driving forces spearheading its growth since his return to Ghana in 1994.
4. *Adowa*-inspired hiplife songs such as “Ekorma Mo” (This Goes to You) by Nkasei, “Eno Abena” (Lady Abena) by Nana Quame featuring Obrafuor, “Nana Buor” (King Buor) by Obuor featuring the Nyame Akwan Group, and the HIV/AIDS awareness song “Okomfo Kom” (the Traditional Priest’s Incantations) by Okomfuor Kwadεε were immensely popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s. *Jama*-inspired hiplife songs such as “Klu Blofo” (Pidgin English) by Buk Bak, “Sradi Nam” (Fatty Meat) by Castro, and “Siklitle” (Sugared candy) by 4 × 4 featuring Castro were arguably some of the most popular in contemporary Ghanaian music between 2002 and 2006, with the most credit going to prolific Ghanaian music producer Jay Q.
5. In carrying out a textual analysis of the lyrics of “Borga,” a song released in 2009 by Sarkodie and featuring J-Town, Arthur makes similar observations (117–18). Identical phonetic mannerisms have been used by musicians such as Budukusu (aka Quata) since the early 2000s.
6. Notably, the *Slip Dance Album* released by Slip Music before then was a multi-genre compilation album which had highlife, hiplife, reggae and ragga/“Raglife” songs.
7. With respect to access to mass media, the *Ghana Demographic and Health Survey 2014* states, “52 percent of women and 78 percent of men age[d] 15–49 listen to the radio at least once a week, and 51 percent of women and 66 percent of men watch television at least once a week. Exposure to print media is much less common; 9 percent of women and 17 percent of men reported reading a newspaper or magazine at least once a week” (39).
8. Ghanaian record producer MJJ’s *Riddim of the gOds* project was launched in Accra in August 2019 and features rappers Sarkodie, Okyeame Kwame, EL, Edem, Strongman, Teephlow, Obibini, and Flowking Stone (one of the duo Bradez).

Acknowledgments

For providing useful comments regarding the linguistic, musicological, and historical perspectives in this article, we are most grateful to Professor Kofi Agyekum (University of Ghana, Legon), Emmanuel Ralph Kotei Nikoi (aka Okra Tom Dawidi), Samuel Kwame Bampoe (aka Sammi B), Yaw Anoff (aka Way Deep), Isaac Duncan-Williams (aka Dr. Duncan), Maame Yaa Owusu (Bayous Court), Nana Fredua-Agyeman Jnr., Fred Dzade, Abena Amponsaa Baafi, Madam Rose Dompseh Anyiwa, Donna Asare-Boateng, and Bills Gborgli aka Papa Bills (Multimedia Group Ltd./Adom FM). We also express our heartfelt thanks to Tomedes translation services for the splendid transcription work and lyric translation from Akan (Twi) to English.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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