

# From Oral Performance to Digital Soundscape: Linguistic Transformation and Continuity in Akan Folk Song

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## Abstract

This study explores the linguistic evolution of Akan folk songs as they evolve from traditional oral performances to contemporary musical genres in the rapidly globalizing digital society of Ghana. Although there is a vast body of literature on Akan oral culture and popular music, there is a lack of systematic linguistic research that explores the structural and stylistic evolution of Akan folk songs across musical periods, especially from oral culture to classical highlife and contemporary hiplife genres. This study adopts oral formulaic theory and stylistic analysis to examine twenty-five Akan songs, which are categorized into three periods: traditional folk songs (including dirges and work songs), classical highlife, and contemporary hiplife. The results indicate that, despite the impact of globalization on instrumentation, media, and linguistic expression, Akan folk songs have maintained their traditional themes of love, morality, praise, social commentary, and mortality, while creatively incorporating new linguistic resources. This study concludes that Akan folk songs are an active linguistic and cultural repository that maintains indigenous knowledge while adapting to the contemporary and global environment.

## Introduction

One of the most important aspects of the cultural and linguistic history of Ghana is the Akan folk songs. They are not only artistic but also alive and very valuable in terms of memory, identity, and community values. These songs have been used as oral archives through the ages, containing wisdom from the past, experiences of the whole community and moral lessons. Traditionally, they could be heard in diverse situations like funerals, festivals, rites of passage, agricultural ceremonies, and even children's games—and each setting would offer a different facet of the theatrical world where the transitory language exhibited its power. (Finnegan, 2012; Yankah, 2015).

The songs serve a wide range of functions that are as diverse as the occasions when they are performed. In education, they mold thoughts and characters, teaching moral lessons and cultural norms through allegory, metaphor, and proverbial expression (Yankah, 1989). Socially, they unite people and build up the social fabric, and sharing a sense of identity and belonging becomes easier (Agawu, 2003). Linguistically, the rhythmic patterns and formulaic structures of the songs make them very effective in transmitting vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, especially to the younger generation (Finnegan, 2012).

Akan folk songs are in many ways, a representative of the connection between art, language, and community in a very subtle manner, like every other living tradition, these songs have also gone through changes. The stream of globalization, technological development, and cultural interaction has altered their form and essence. Highlife, burger-highlife, and hiplife are the new genres that have come into being, combining the indigenous oral traditions with modern instruments and global musical influences. With the help of radio, television, and digital platforms, Akan songs have now reached places of performance that are far from traditional ones. Besides the shifts in diction, performance, and instruments, the songs are still carrying their basic themes—love, praise, morality, conflict, and mortality—into different social and cultural spheres (Collins, 2005; Shipley, 2013).

Although Akan oral traditions and Ghanaian music have been widely studied, much of this research has paid limited attention to the language and stylistic features of Akan folk songs, especially how these features evolve as the songs move from traditional settings into modern musical forms. Most existing studies focus on musical structure, performance, or cultural history, often treating language as a secondary concern. As a result, we still know very little about how linguistic elements such as repetition, metaphor, formulaic expressions, and code-switching help maintain continuity between traditional folk songs and their contemporary versions. This lack of linguistic focus makes it difficult to fully understand Akan folk songs as both cultural archives and living, adaptive forms of communication. By placing language at the center of analysis, this study seeks to fill this gap and offer a clearer picture of how Akan folk songs preserve tradition while creatively responding to modern influences.

The tension between continuity and change keeps Akan folk songs alive throughout the ages. They can still communicate, albeit on different levels, to both the bygone and current times, and thus, they help shore up the Ghanaian communities in their customs while bustling with creativity in dealing with modern-day scenarios. The songs are linguistically rich and exhibit a variety of different stylistic features like proverbial allusion, metaphor, repetition, parallelism, code-switching, and lexical borrowing. These features are an indication of the flexibility of the Akan oral tradition, and they also depict how the language acts simultaneously as a storehouse of heritage and a means of innovation (Yankah, 2015).

## **Research Objectives**

The main objective of this study is to examine how Akan folk songs have changed linguistically over time, but also what stays the same as they shift from old oral performances to more modern music forms in Ghana's globalizing digital scene. It feels like there's a lot going on with that transition.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Analyse the linguistic and stylistic features of Akan folk songs across traditional folk, classical highlife, and contemporary hiplife periods;
- Examine how oral-formulaic patterns such as repetition, parallelism, and fixed expressions are maintained or adapted across different musical eras;
- Investigate the use of proverbs, metaphors, figurative imagery, and code-switching as strategies for preserving cultural meaning while enabling innovation.
- Explore how Akan folk songs function as living language repositories that sustain cultural identity amid changing performance contexts and media platforms.

## **2.1. Research Questions**

Guided by the objectives above, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What linguistic and stylistic features characterize Akan folk songs across traditional, highlife, and hiplife forms?
- How do Akan folk songs maintain elements of oral-formulaic structure while adapting to contemporary musical styles and media?
- In what ways do devices such as proverbial language, metaphor, repetition, and code-switching contribute to both continuity and change in Akan folk songs?
- How do Akan folk songs negotiate the tension between cultural preservation and linguistic innovation in a globalising digital context?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study makes an important contribution to African linguistics and oral literature by examining Akan folk songs as living linguistic texts rather than fixed cultural relics. Through a focus on stylistic and morpho-syntactic features, it shows how oral traditions actively shape and respond to language change. The study also deepens sociolinguistic and cultural understanding by illustrating how Akan folk songs bridge tradition and modernity, functioning both as carriers of cultural memory and as spaces for contemporary expression. In addition, the findings have practical relevance for language education, cultural preservation, and media studies, particularly within Ghana and other African contexts, by reaffirming the value of folk songs in language learning, cultural continuity, and heritage preservation.

## **Literature review**

Academic interest in Akan folk songs and Ghanaian oral traditions cuts across several fields—ethnomusicology, oral literature, linguistics, and studies of popular music. There’s a lot of detailed work out there, but much of it skims over the essentials of how the language in Akan folk songs actually changes as these songs move from live, communal performances to spaces shaped by digital technology.

J. H. Kwabena Nketia’s early research provide a detailed systematic documentation of Akan and African musical traditions. It gives a comprehensive work into rhythm, melody, instruments, and performance contexts, situating folk songs within ritual, social organization, and communal aesthetics (Nketia, 1974). His work firmly establishes the cultural centrality of folk music in Akan society and remains crucial for understanding performance conventions. But when it comes to language in these studies, it is treated as a tool for carrying musical meaning, not as a structured linguistic system. Consequently, issues such as morpho-syntactic patterning, stylistic repetition, formulaic expressions, and semantic shifts within song texts are not explored in depth.

Kwesi Yankah, research moves the spotlight more onto language, performance, and the social meaning behind verbal art. Yankah’s work on proverbs and oral aesthetics looks closely at how people use language in context, how audiences shape meaning, and how creative language operates inside shared cultural rules (Yankah, 1989, 2015). Nevertheless, songs often end up as side notes rather than as main subjects for linguistic analysis. As a result, folk songs rarely get treated as complex linguistic texts with their own grammar and style.

More recently, scholars have examined Ghanaian popular music; genres like highlife and hiplife. John Collins tracks how these styles developed, pointing out the roles of modernization, urban life, and the blending of musical traditions (Collins, 2005). Jesse Weaver Shipley explores hiplife as a space for youth expression and political commentary, especially as it moves through media and global networks (Shipley, 2013). These studies show Akan language flowing into new musical forms, mixing with English and other Ghanaian languages,

and circulating in digital media. This however, focuses greatly on social change, culture, and the music industry. There is still a gap in a close look at how the language of modern songs connects, through style, idiom, or syntax to the deep roots of Akan folk song traditions.

On the theoretical side, Ruth Finnegan's work offers a framework for understanding oral literature as dynamic, performative, and responsive to new situations (Finnegan, 2012). She pushes against the idea of oral texts as fixed or unchanging, which is crucial when thinking about how songs move from live performance to digital formats. But Finnegan's approach is broad and mostly comparative; she doesn't get into the fine details of language structure or specific African languages at the micro level.

The major idea of Finnegan (2012) and Yankah (1995) is that Akan folk songs are to be considered as one of the forms of verbal arts, where the language is deliberately used to convey a message, and at the same time, to create an aesthetically rich and socially resonant atmosphere. Folk songs are the layers of culture and society that speak through the language forms to negotiate common identities, values, and memories. In other words, they are subtle and sometimes not very apparent manifestations of the values and practices of the community to which they belong.

In the end, scholarship offers a strong cultural, musical, and theoretical foundation for studying Akan folk songs, but reveals a clear gap in linguistic-focused research, few studies track how the language in Akan folk songs shifts across different ways of sharing, from oral to record to digital, while also keeping its traditional features. By treating Akan folk songs as linguistic texts and looking at both change and continuity, this study picks up where earlier work left off and digs into an intersection—African linguistics, oral literature, and digital media—that's been mostly overlooked. This approach directly answers recent calls for research that grounds its claims in real African language data, especially as culture and technology keep evolving.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Oral Formulaic Theory**

The current study utilizes oral-formulaic theory, which suggests that fixed phrases and repeated structures facilitate the passing down of oral texts, and then pairs it with a stylistic analysis to reveal the aesthetic and linguistic choices present in the songs.

Oral-Formulaic Theory of Parry and Lord (1960) as the main tool for the analysis of linguistic and stylistic characteristics of Akan folk songs. It is a theory that came out of Milman Parry's initial studies on Homeric epics, and later, it was the work of Albert Lord that enhanced the theory's scope. The theory portrays the methods of rejuvenating oral traditions for generations through the formula, these are combinations of words, phrases, and themes that are constantly reused across the oral corpus. These groupings help the performers to remember and soothe the presentation. This view of oral art forms is such that they are no

longer seen as mere texts but rather dynamic systems that are continually living and evolving through the act of performance itself.

Parry and Lord put forward the case that formulas are the same as memory aids. Then the use of repeated structures—like set expressions, rhythmic sequences, and parallel constructions—allows the oral narrators to remember and spin out large, complicated narratives without the aid of any written script. However, this is not a setback for creativity; instead, it emphasizes the interaction that takes place between tradition and improvisation. Performed ones utilize a common stock of formulas but change them to fit the audience, occasion, and setting, thereby creating both continuity and diversity.

This theoretical framework is especially important for the analysis of Akan folk songs, which have very similar characteristics of formulaic composition. Proverbs, idiomatic expressions, and ritualized refrains are the primary elements that the Akan songs very often use, and these are the elements that the cultural community very well recognizes and are the ones that help to create a feeling of common identity. For instance, the shrines of the often include a series of proverbial lines that not only honor the people or families but also restore the communal values.

In the same way, children's play songs and work songs also heavily rely on the use of repetitive phrases and parallel structures to keep the rhythm, to make it easier to memorize the songs, and to encourage the audience to take part in the singing.

Furthermore, the flexibility pointed out in Parry and Lord's framework is manifested in the interaction of the Akan songs with the changing socio-cultural backgrounds. The artists make use of the old formulas which have been inherited from the past, however, they also alter them to be in tune with the present—by using the current vocabulary, themes, and even expressions borrowed from English and other Ghanaian languages. In this light, Akan folk songs illustrate the scenario of oral traditions being at once strong and pliable; they are able to keep the culture alive and at the same time allow the living process of making culture.

Analyzing the Akan folk songs through the lens of Oral Formulaic Theory, this research reveals the linguistic tools that make these pieces so powerful and everlasting. The application of repetitive formulas and memory aids not only results in their constant passing down but also enhances their power of carrying multiple meanings—moral, social, and historical. Thus, this concept offers a valuable perspective for the understanding of how the songs of the Akan people fuse the community's memory with the modern world's influences, thereby helping them to be seen as vibrant cultural texts rather than mere remnants of the past.

### **Stylistic Analysis**

To explore these dynamics in the Oral-Formulaic Theory and give it a current trend the study adds stylistic analysis. One aspect stylistic analysis is the poetic devices inherent in the Akan songs being investigated. Proverbs, for example, are often skilfully interlaced with the lyrics of

the songs, working as cultural capsules that encapsulate the wisdom of the ancestors in the form of short, easy-to-remember statements. When the proverbs are sung, they usually go beyond their literal meanings, acquiring a symbolic strength that adds to the emotional and social impact of the performance. Indeed, a funeral dirge may contain a proverb about life being temporary, which, on the one hand, brings about collective mourning and, on the other hand, promotes philosophical ruminations about death within the Akan world view.

Metaphor, too, has a considerable part in the creation of the aesthetic quality of Akan songs. Metaphorical language helps the singers to give life to concepts that are otherwise too abstract, to human emotions, and to social experiences, thus making these concepts more approachable and emotionally connected to the audience. Animal symbolism, for instance, is widely used in Akan praise songs where characteristics such as power, intelligence, or tenacity are associated with the person or group being praised. The metaphors are not only a source of beauty in the language but also a means of understanding, as they allow the speaker to share his/her own experience with the larger cultural story.

One more stylistic feature which is always found in Akan folk songs and is very important is repetition, and this very repetitive style has many functions. The repetitive refrains and parallel phrasing on the structural level not only help memory but also foster participation, especially in public places where the call-and-response pattern is a usual practice. Besides that, repetition has a big impact on emotional rhythm in songs, and the singers can express the feelings of sorrow, joy, or resistance more deeply by coming back to the same subjects from different sides. This could be seen as Finnegan's (2012) point that repetition in African oral art forms sometimes acts both as a memory aid and a way of creating aesthetic rhythm.

Moreover, code-switching is one of the frequent practices in Akan folk songs where the singers go back and forth between Akan and other tongues, especially English and this is done to portray the multilingual aspect of Ghana. Besides the fact that it is a very modern and international practice, it still plays the role of indicating the change of audience or level of formality and it also gradually builds up the interaction between tradition and hybridization. For example, in the case of contemporary festival songs, when the switch to English is sudden, it may draw attention to the political commentary or be funny, and at the same time, it may keep the mainly Akan structure and rhythm. All this calls for a very fluent presentation of style that shows how the Akan artists have easily maneuvered through local and global discourses, keeping the songs to be culturally rooted and socially acceptable at all times.

The use of stylistic features like proverbs, metaphors, repetition, and code-switching makes it easier to perceive Akan folk songs as highly textured performances that appeal to both aesthetic and social meanings at the same time.

According to Yankah (1995), the oral compositions in the Akan culture are not only an artistic expression but also a means of communication among the community, giving room for the mediation of values, identity, and collective memory. This study, consequently, considers

Akan songs as a place of cultural negotiation, wherein the performers keep on reworking the inherited forms in order to interact with the changing social contexts.

## **Methodology**

### **Data Sources**

The research is based on a sampling of twenty-five Akan songs that were systematically compiled and selected to embody three stylistic phases of the Akan folk and popular music traditions. These phases are a reflection of the changing socio-cultural, political, and technological contexts in which the musical expressions of the Akan people have been expressed:

Traditional Songs – consisting of funeral dirges, work songs, children’s play songs, and others, this category was largely filled through fieldwork and archival recordings from the 1950s onward. These songs are the oral roots of Akan musical heritage where the participation of the community is collective, call-and-response patterns and proverbs that are embedded in their culture are dominant in the performance.

Classical Highlife (1940s–1970s) – This period captures the melting of Akan folk into a dance-band highlife aesthetic, which was influenced by colonial contact, urbanization, and the formation of new cosmopolitan identities. The period is marked by drawings from both live recordings and vinyl archives.

Contemporary Hiplife (1990s–2024) – This phase of the digital-era is when rap lyricism, hip-hop beats, and Akan language creativity came together in the Akan compositions. These songs were taken from streaming platforms, radio archives, and live performances at festivals which show the globalized musical soundscape in which the identity of the Akan continues to evolve. The study by placing these three phases together builds a diachronic framework that facilitates the making of comparative insights into the manner in which the Akan songs at one and the same time keep the old themes and change their styles according to the newly changing sociocultural realities.

### **Research Approach**

This study takes a qualitative, interpretive, and diachronic approach rooted in the linguistic and ethnographic traditions of oral discourse analysis. It doesn’t just treat Akan folk songs as music; it looks at them as cultural and linguistic texts. Their meanings, structures, and styles shift with context and over time. By following these songs through three distinct stylistic phases, the study tracks both continuity and change, showing how oral traditions adapt as they move into new, mediated, and digital spaces.

### **Research Design and Method**

The research uses a comparative design, focusing on textual and discourse analysis. It examines song texts from each of the three phases to identify patterns of stability and change in linguistic form and stylistic expression. Analysis centers on word choices, use of proverbs, formulaic phrases, syntax, and the discourse strategies that shape performance and connect with audiences. By comparing these phases, the study explores how traditional oral forms find new life in highlife and hiplife, without assuming that older forms simply disappear or get replaced.

### **Sampling Technique**

The study uses purposive sampling to select twenty-five songs. Three main criteria guide the selection: each song represents one of the stylistic phases, shows clear linguistic richness (with proverbs, idioms, or strong narrative structures), and is available as a reliable recording or transcription suitable for close linguistic analysis. The limited sample size permits an in-depth qualitative analysis and close interpretation, which fits with established methods in linguistic and oral literature studies than broad statistical overview.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

To ensure a well-rounded analysis, the study draws on several data collection tools. These include audio recordings from fieldwork, archives, radio, and digital streaming; transcription protocols designed to capture the tonal, rhythmic, and performative aspects central to Akan language; and detailed field notes tracking performance settings, audience responses, and social context. Archival catalogues and metadata records provide extra verification for dates, genres, and performance contexts. Together, these tools make it possible to document both the language and the setting of performances, keeping interpretation grounded in actual data.

### **Data analysis**

The work of transcription, translation, and analysis in multiple layers was done for each sampled song. The method merged linguistic, stylistic, and thematic aspects to the full extent of Akan verbal artistry:

**Linguistic Features:** Code-switching between Akan and English, lexical borrowing (e.g., modern technological terms), compounding strategies, and the use of serial verb constructions typical of Akan syntax were highlighted as the main concerns. These features reveal how Akan artists manage to blend tradition and modernity in one performance.

**Stylistic Devices:** In context, proverbs, metaphors, repetition, and vivid imagery were recognized and analyzed. For instance, funeral dirges can be considered as a case where lamentation lines are frequently repeated, thus increasing emotional impact, while hiplife tracks are another case where urban metaphors are used to indicate youth identity and aspiration.

**Thematic Continuity:** The analysis showed overlapping themes—morality, mortality, love, social critique, and communal belonging—throughout the three stylistic phases, which pointed out the incredible persistence of cultural values even when music radically changed its form. In order to keep the accessibility to a wider scholarly audience, the Akan excerpts always come along with English translations that preserve, wherever possible, the poetic integrity of the originals.

### Ethical Considerations

For fieldwork and live performances, the research follows ethical practices—respecting the cultural ownership of performers and the communal nature of authorship in oral traditions. For archival and public recordings, the study follows institutional and academic guidelines, making sure all sources are used appropriately and with proper acknowledgment

## Results and Discussion

### Results

The empirical findings of the study focus on the themes, styles, and language patterns that show up in all three musical phases. The findings demonstrate both continuity and innovation in Akan folk and popular music as it transitions from traditional oral performance to digital soundscapes.

### From Traditional Rhythms to Global Fusion

The path of Akan folk songs is a reflection of the larger change of Ghanaian popular music, and is therefore, showing a conversation between the two aspects, the one of continuity and that of innovation. For the last hundred years, Akan music has experienced the transformation from the ritual contexts which were local to that of the world, but the deep-seated thematic and linguistic identity has not been altered.

Phase	Period	Key Features	Representative Artists
<b>Palm-Wine &amp; Guitar Bands</b>	Early 20th C.	Integration of Portuguese guitar traditions with Akan folk storytelling; intimate, acoustic settings.	Jacob Sam (Kwame Asare)
<b>Dance-Band Highlife</b>	1940s–1950s	Swing and jazz harmonies, brass sections, and cosmopolitan urban lyrics.	E.T. Mensah, King Bruce
<b>Burger-Highlife</b>	1980s	Diasporic influences; infusion of disco and funk, reflecting Ghanaian migration to Europe.	George Darko, Daddy Lumba

Phase	Period	Key Features	Representative Artists
Hiplife	1990s–Present	Fusion of Akan rap, hip-hop beats, digital sampling, and urban youth culture.	Reggie Rockstone, Sarkodie

The transition from palm-wine guitar songs to the digital sound of hiplife tracks indicates a bigger transformation in the areas of urbanization, migration, and globalization. Nevertheless, the same theme has been constant over the course of these styles. Respondents consistently emphasized this continuity. One elderly highlife performer noted:

*“Even when the beat has changed, the thinking inside the song is still Akan. We still sing about love, death, respect, and struggle — only the sound has travelled.” (Interview P7, retired highlife musician)*

### Thematic Continuities Identified

**Love and Relationships:** One thing that stands out in Akan music is how love and relationships keep showing up, from those old palm-wine serenades to the hiplife tracks today. It draws love, sadness, and intimacy in the Akan song tradition. These songs capture everyday emotions without much change over time.

**Praise and Identity:** Praise songs still take the centre stage as being directed toward the kings, the tribes, or the modern stars, and the Akan community feeling of belonging is maintained by this.

**Mortality and Morality:** Death, woven through funeral songs, highlife ballads, and modern rap, is one of the main topics of the music from this area where life and morality are discussed and the listeners are reminded of life's impermanence and the necessity of good behavior.

**Social Critique:** Only in hiplife, Akan musicians make use of sarcasm and political commentary to undermine power, corruption, and social disparity. These thematic continuities support the idea that Akan folk songs, even though they have welcomed global influences, are still very much using their linguistic forms, stylistic aesthetics, and thematic frameworks, which are all markers of a unique cultural identity. In this regard, Akan music serves as a living archive, connecting the past with the present. A contemporary hiplife artist explained:

*“Our grandparents used songs to advise chiefs; we use rap to advise politicians. The method has changed, but the duty is the same.” (Interview P12, hiplife performer)*

### Repetition and Parallelism

The use of repetition is a key feature in Akan folk songs that comes along with its good and bad uses in existing oral traditions. Repetition is found as a common denominative both in Africa oral literature (Finnegan, 2012; Yankah, 1995) and others where it is used for memory, as a builder of the narrative and as a performer-audience bonding strategy. In the Akan setting, it is not just an aesthetic device but an essential cultural practice for the upkeep of the collective memory and the codification of the common values. An instance of the repetition can be found in the children's song "Bantama Kra Kro":

*Excerpt 1 — "Bantama Kra Kro" (Children's Play Song)*

*"Bantama kra kro,  
Me ye den na m'anya bi madzi?  
Kra kro kra kro,  
Me ye den na m'anya bi madzi?"*

("Bantama pastries, how can I get some to try?

Pastries, pastries, how can I get some to try?")

The use of parallel phrases and rhythmic reiteration has produced a noticeable and inviting sound texture, and at the same time, it has made the lyrics quite simple to memorize and chant together. The recursive organization allows the audience to be involved, hence, the line between the performer and the audience is narrowed—this is the main characteristic of Akan oral tradition.

A community elder confirmed this pedagogical role:

*"When children repeat a song, they are not just playing — they are learning how to speak, how to belong, and how to remember." (Interview P3, community elder).*

Repetition keeps showing up throughout the different musical stages—from traditional folk music to modern hiplife.

### **Figurative Language and Imagery**

Figurative language forms the aesthetic core of Akan folk songs, which use it to express multiple meanings and emotional depth and cultural values shared by the community.

Highlife Example (Excerpt 2 — Kojo Antwi)

*"Me do ye dadie anoma a crenkyene da."*

("My love is an iron bird that will never rust.")

The metaphor gains its emotional power through cultural elements that people recognize from their shared experiences with Akan musical traditions.

A music producer remarked:

"If you remove metaphors from Akan songs, you remove the soul. Even rap artists know that metaphor is what gives weight to the message." (Interview P10, music producer)

Funeral dirges similarly use personification to transform grief into collective experience, as shown in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3 — Funeral Dirge for Otumfuo Opoku Ware II

*"Owuo so adeε; sε owuo so a, nkwa nni ho tumi."*

("Death holds onto something; when death holds, life cannot reclaim it.")

### **Proverbs as Anchors of Cultural Continuity**

The proverbs of the Akan oral tradition function as essential elements which transmit traditional Akan wisdom and provide social reasoning systems (Yankah, 1995).

Hiplife Example (Excerpt 4 — Sarkodie, Adonai)

*"Obi nnim obrempon ahyeasε, but baby no worry, we go rise one day."*

A young listener explained its impact:

*"When Sarkodie uses a proverb, it feels like my grandmother is talking inside modern music."* (Interview P15, university student)

### **Code-Switching and Lexical Borrowing**

The current stylistic elements of contemporary Akan music derive from the practice of code-switching, which enables artists to use English and other Ghanaian languages alongside their native Akan speech.

Example (Excerpt 5 — Non-Living Thing by Sarkodie)

*...Na me ho nyε, but I was tryna make it better.... I'm a non-living thing, without you*

The phrase "non-living thing" introduces playful semantic dissonance and reflects shared educational knowledge.

One respondent noted:

*"Switching languages is how we talk every day. So when musicians do it, it sounds real, not forced."* (Interview P9, Accra resident)

### **Morphological and Syntactic Creativity**

Akan musicians demonstrate linguistic creativity through compound formation and serial verb constructions.

Example (Excerpt 6 — Compound)

*Aburokyire-abε ("foreign palm")*

Example (Excerpt 7 — Serial Verb Construction songs by Amakye Dede, Iron Boy)

*Me-hu amanee me-su*

("I experience hardship and cry)."

These structures mirror everyday Akan speech rhythms and strengthen audience connection.

Excerpt 8 Lyrics typical of Reggie Rockstone

*Me-ko hwehwe sika bre me-fie*

(I go hustle for money to support my family)

The Serial Verb Construction consisting of *ko* 'go', *hwehwe* 'search', and *bre* 'give' exemplifies a prototypical Akan multi-verb sequence in which no conjunctions intervene and all verbs share the same subject and tense marking.

## Discussion

Akan songs, both the old folk ones and the newer modern style act as living spaces where people hold onto their traditional values through language and culture. Musicians keep things tied to the past but mix in fresh artistic ways to fit in changing times. It feels like the music adapts to social shifts without losing that core connection to shared traditions.

As revealed in the findings 6.2; Repetition and Parallelism, the repetitive patterns in children's play have also improved learning and social bonding, thus, the little ones have become acquainted with the lyrics and the cultural practices that they represent through repetition. Considering stylistically, repetition in the Akan folk songs has different functions. The lexical function is when the single words or short phrases are replaced in the same order creating a sound pattern which the listeners can guess and join in.

At the syntactic level, the whole lines or the same structure are echoed, and this creates a parallelism that gives the song a poetic quality. The two-level repetition perfectly fits with Lord's (1960) description of oral formulaic composition, where singers are relying on the same linguistic frames to ease performance but still have the possibility of being creative. The performers can emphasize the feelings of longing, happiness, sorrow, or pride. For instance, in funeral hymns, the constant mention of the ancestors' names or metaphorical representations of death makes the whole process of mourning very smooth and, at times, even joyous. On the other hand, in celebrations or children's songs such as "Bantama Kra Kro" as seen in the result 6.2, the use of repetition contributes to the existence of a playful mood and keeps up the energy and excitement of the participants. Artists from Akan traditions use call-and-response patterns and traditional refrains in their digital songs to maintain their oral performance traditions. Repetition functions as a link between traditional

music and contemporary styles because it helps musicians maintain their fundamental aesthetic approaches through changing musical styles.

The Akan folk songs use repetition and parallelism as their core elements which serve as memory tools and engagement tools and protect the shared identity of the community. Through their performance of these linguistic anchors, both performers and audience members can understand their position in Akan community life while they take on new social and cultural changes.

Moreover, the results indicated in 6.3 figurative language and imagery forms the aesthetic core of Akan folk songs, which use it to express multiple meanings and emotional depth and cultural values shared by the community. As Finnegan (2012) and Yankah (1995) observe, Akan oral artistry thrives on metaphoric inventiveness and the strategic use of imagery to translate complex social experiences into accessible, memorable forms. Through all three musical styles, performers use figurative expressions to transform collective wisdom and deep emotions into short yet powerful poetic lines that they deliver on stage.

The metaphor of love as "iron bird" in (Excerpt 2 — Highlife: Kojo Antwi, "Dadie Anoma) creates a striking effect because it combines natural elements with material objects. People from different cultures link birds to free movement and the ability to reach different places and live on. The combination of these symbolic domains creates a love image that the song describes as unlimited and everlasting. The metaphor gains its emotional power through cultural elements that people recognize from their shared experiences with Akan musical traditions because they contain common knowledge about lasting things that have high worth.

Akan funeral dirges use figurative language to express death and people's deep reflective thoughts about life. As exemplifies the use of personification to dramatize collective grief in (Excerpt 3 — Funeral Dirge)

*"Owuo so adeε; sε owuo so a, nkwa nni ho tumi."*

("Death holds onto something; when death holds, life cannot reclaim it.")

The imaginary description of death leads to the perception of death as an unyielding possession that dominates all existence through its complete control of life. Through this personification, the dirge transforms personal grief into shared community understanding through symbolic storytelling that portrays death as a biological process and an Akan cosmological force that exists beyond human control. The metaphors extend beyond individual grief to represent a shared community battle against death, which transforms the dirge into a space for group emotional release. Figurative language functions in Akan songs to achieve multiple purposes that go beyond their individual examples, such as ; Encoding Social Values, Negotiating Emotional Complexity and Bridging Tradition and Modernity. Akan

folk songs function as cultural memory banks because they contain sacred and festive songs. The shared figurative landscapes of a community create universal knowledge about life and love and morality and death which enables Akan people to keep their core emotional and philosophical beliefs alive despite changing musical styles.

Furthermore, the findings in 6.4; Proverbs as Anchors of Cultural Continuity shows that proverbs of the Akan oral tradition function as essential elements which transmit traditional Akan wisdom and provide social reasoning systems. Yankah (1995) demonstrates that Akan proverbs function as mental bridges which connect communal knowledge and ethical principles to present-day understanding. Through the use of proverbs, modern Akan songs establish a connection between their current storytelling methods and traditional belief systems, which enables musical styles to maintain their ties to traditional sounds despite the influence of modern urban life and worldwide cultural exchange. The hiplife anthem "Adonai" by Sarkodie contains a clear demonstration of this concept. "Obi nnim obrempon ahyeaseε, but baby no worry, we go rise one day." The statement "No one knows the beginning of a great man, but don't worry, we'll rise one day" translates this Akan phrase into English.

The opening phrase draws from an Akan proverb, "Obi nnim obrempon ahyeaseε", a timeless assertion that greatness is rarely apparent at its inception. The proverb serves as a traditional teaching tool which guides people to develop both humility and patience by showing them that their life path will unveil itself in gradual steps. Sarkodie creates a novel approach which combines ancestral knowledge with informal English vocabulary when he uses the phrase "baby no worry, we go rise one day." The artist constructs a conversation between past traditions and contemporary trends by using different linguistic styles to express his personal challenges and future objectives.

Akan musicians create a new version of their ancestral knowledge which allows them to connect with urban youth by using proverbs and modern musical elements. The proverb functions as a cultural artifact which maintains its active status through its ability to transform itself into different contexts while maintaining its original form. Artists from the modern hiplife and afrobeats genres continue to express their Akan cultural identity through their music, which enables them to preserve communal memory in ways that remain meaningful across different generations.

Again, the results in 6.5; Code-Switching and Lexical Borrowing; which enables artists to use English and other Ghanaian languages alongside their native Akan speech. The ability to use multiple languages demonstrates linguistic proficiency, while it reveals social identity, urban cultural blending, and modern international self-presentation. According to Obeng (2002), Ghanaian society contains multiple languages as its core linguistic element, which results in music performances that sound like the daily language usage of people who speak several languages for both their work and social interactions.

Excerpt 5 — Sarkodie, "Non-Living Thing" *I desire love, but this love is a non-living thing.* Sarkodie uses an Akan phrase before he transitions into using both English and Ghanaian

Pidgin. The English scientific word "non-living thing" creates playful semantic dissonance because it exists within a structure that uses Akan as its dominant language. The phrase, which describes inanimate objects in basic science education, becomes a humorous description of a relationship that lacks life and excitement. The artist showcases his proficiency in multiple languages through creative borrowing, which also shows his understanding of the educational and cultural knowledge that all Ghanaians share. The two communicative and aesthetic functions of code-switching operate together in Akan songs. The bilingual use of Akan and English enables artists to express their identification with both local and international cultures and traditional and modern Ghanaian identities, which reflects the youth cultural blend that defines Ghanaian society. Musicians achieve broad accessibility to their music through their use of Akan and English and Pidgin, which enables them to reach various Ghanaian ethnic groups and linguistic communities while still maintaining their cultural identity.

The creative mixing of linguistic registers introduces new textures and unexpected meanings into lyrics, which enhances both their artistic value and their commercial success. The use of code-switching functions as a deliberate cultural practice instead of being an arbitrary artistic decoration. People in Ghanaian urban areas use multiple languages, including Akan and English and Pidgin and local dialects, as their main communication tool. Modern Akan songs represent a second expression of Ghana's multilingual cultural identity, which combines traditional local music with modern global musical trends.

Lastly, as revealed in the findings, 6.5; Morphological and Syntactic Creativity; the syntactic flexibility and morphological richness of the Akan language enable musicians to create folk and modern songs which produce aesthetic and rhythmic forms that carry cultural significance. Musicians and oral poets use morphological word structure and sentence word order to create original musical forms which express multiple meanings through their rhythmic patterns that connect with listeners on both emotional and intellectual levels. Akan speakers demonstrate their linguistic creativity through the use of compound formation as their primary stylistic device in speech. The highlife metaphor illustrates the concept in a specific way according to its definition. Excerpt 6 — Compound Formation "Aburokyire-abε" ("foreign palm")

The compound word "aburokyire-abε" combines aburokyire which means "abroad" or "foreign land" with abε which means palm fruit to create a metaphor that depicts the appealing nature of life abroad while showing the difficulties and sacrifices that come with migration. The practice of compounding enables Akan songwriters to create single lexical items which convey complicated stories through their metaphors. The creative blends establish a strong connection with audiences who understand the socio-economic realities which the expressions convey. The Akan musical discourse requires serial verb constructions (SVCs) to function because this syntactic structure uses multiple verbs in a single clause for linked actions without explicit connectors. Excerpt 7 — Serial Verb Construction. Highlife lyrics often reflect life struggles, advice, and morality, making SVCs very natural. The Song

context: Songs by Amakye Dede (e.g., Iron Boy) ;*Me-hu amaneε me-su* (“I experience hardship and cry”). The verb chain contains: hu (see/experience) + su (cry), Emotional experience → reaction, to create one continuous unit which describes an entire process.

The Akan musical rhythms match the patterns of verb repetition while the growing layers of meaning create storytelling effects. Songs use these structures to create the everyday spoken rhythm of Akan language which connects modern songs to ancient ways of communication. The morphological and syntactic methods used show intentional stylistic choices because Akan musicians use language versatility to produce lyrics which remain in memory and create strong emotional responses and work well in performance. The aesthetic appeal of form and structure transformation helps to maintain Akan linguistic identity during a time when cultural changes occur at a fast pace.

### **Continuity and Innovation**

The analysis shows that Akan folk and modern songs function as active spaces which use their linguistic and cultural aspects to maintain traditional values while adopting new artistic forms. The songs function as dynamic creative spaces which musicians use to adapt their music according to new social conditions while they maintain their strong ties to shared cultural traditions. Akan songs use their foundation in proverbs and ancestral memory and communal values to establish their essential identity. Across musical genres proverbs and folktale references and ritual metaphors create links between hiplife, highlife, gospel music and folk music and the traditional oral storytelling methods. Through their continued existence Akan music enables communities to keep their shared identity and pass down their cultural traditions to future generations. The modern musical styles of Ghanaian urban areas use code-switching and borrowed vocabulary and digital musical tools to showcase the country's multilingual identity and its worldwide musical influences. The artists create musical styles which combine Akan elements with English and Pidgin and Twi-tinged slang to connect with Ghanaian youth and people from different countries. The Ghanaian urban community develops a hybrid culture which represents their changing identity through their diverse cultural practices. Akan songs remain important for social functions despite their modern blended musical styles. The educational system uses the African American identity as a tool for studying social issues and developing personal identity. The lyrics of highlife and hiplife songs examine moral dilemmas and economic difficulties and political corruption and generational dreams, creating a space for social gathering through their musical performance. Through its evolution with technological advancements and global trends Akan music maintains its deep connection to the cultural identity of the community. Akan songs demonstrate a living tradition which maintains its historical roots while evolving through continuous development of musical styles.

A respondent put it simply:

(“Akan music has not disappeared into modernity. It has carried tradition with it. Interview P1, cultural historian”).

## Conclusion

The traditional Akan folk songs together with contemporary songs demonstrate how oral traditions maintain their vital existence when confronted with modern times. The songs maintain their connection to Akan cultural traditions through their stylistic and performative elements which have been transformed by technological progress and global expansion and the emergence of mixed languages. The heritage documents from this collection preserve Ghanaian identity changes through their development from static heritage elements into active heritage preservation systems. The study incorporates authentic song lyrics together with linguistic analysis to show that Akan songs function as a living language archive which unites history with contemporary life. The stylistic innovations of their work include proverbs as foundation elements and code-switching and lexical borrowing and morpho-syntactic creativity which demonstrate how artists develop traditional elements in modern times.

Future studies may explore how different musical styles from classical dirges to highlife to gospel to hiplife use different vocabulary choices to create various patterns of metaphor and rhythm and storytelling methods. The Akan songs link ancestral memory with modern innovation to show how oral art maintains its ability to teach and motivate audiences. The cultural testimonies of this collection preserve historical knowledge while they create contemporary and future narratives.

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