

Singing the Songs: Towards Elder S.K. Ampiah's Lyrical Intent

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Abstract: *It is truistic that every songwriter has an intent and purpose for composing any particular song. Unfortunately, there are some occasions where the users distort the songwriter's intent. Songs of Elder S.K. Ampiah, an iconic songwriter of Ghanaian Christian music, are no exception to the above phenomenon. It appears that the lyrics of some of his popular gospel songs have been distorted by Ghanaian gospel artistes, church singers, and the general populace. This paper, therefore, investigates and documents Elder S.K. Ampiah's lyrical intent of his selected popular gospel songs and postulates reasons for his choice of lyrics. Using interview, document, and audio review for data collection, a textual analysis of Elder S.K. Ampiah's selected popular gospel songs revealed that the distortion of his song lyrics usually does not alter the theme of the lyrics. However, it sometimes does not transmit or communicate the songwriter's intent to the listener, ultimately defeating the song's purpose. This paper, therefore, recommends that recording artists and singers should as much as possible investigate and keep to the intent of the songwriter to ameliorate the problem of "lyrical distortion".*

Keywords: *Elder S.K. Ampiah, distortion, song lyrics, songwriter's intent, gospel music*

I. INTRODUCTION

Music has long been an effective way to communicate to people, and the lyrics of songs play a significant role in delivering this communication (Adinkrah, 2008; Ransom, 2015). Ransom further posited that one could increase well-being by mindfully listening to meaning-filled lyrics bolstered by music's ability to influence emotion. Also, music, especially songs, has been a powerful strategy for sharing history across generations. Music can be experienced as culture, language, emotion, communication, performance, religion, self-expression, and a discipline to gain mastery (Nyland & Acker, 2012; Trehub et al., 2015). Regardless of the many functions of music, one fundamental function is to communicate (Chen, 2020; Corke, 2002; Cross, 2009; Miell et al., 2005).

Firdaus (2013) postulated that every song has its message in examining topical themes used in song lyrics. The appeal and effectiveness of the song to the listener depend on the lyrics. Similarly, Russo and Thompson (2004) noted that songs involve a complex and robust connection between melody and lyrics, in that melody and lyrics are often coordinated for overall emotional meaning. It is essential to acknowledge this study because the message contained in a song lyric can be delivered depending on how the writer puts the words in the lyrics. Music and lyrics have been a part of every society, from Gregorian chants used to memorize and communicate religious passages and psalms to protest songs of the civil rights movement (Apel, 1958; Levitin, 2006; Rodnitzky, 1969).

It is quite common for words to have a different or broader lexical meaning in song than in speech. (Turpin & Stebbins, 2010, p. 8) acknowledged that *songs, like poetry, may have multiple competing lexical meanings. Here, it is necessary to distinguish the meanings intended by the composer (which may be multiple and intentional) and those constructed by listeners interpreting the song.* Song lyrics are, indeed, an integral part of vocal music because they express the composer's intent. The importance of lyrics makes it necessary for composers to reflect on the choice of words for their composition. Some composers pray to receive inspiration from God for their song lyrics. For some, they carefully choose their lyrics to address particular issues or send particular messages; hence, when the song's lyrics are distorted or sung the wrong way, the purpose for which the song was composed is defeated. It is, therefore, unfair if the lyrics are wrongly represented.

It is generally believed that music is life, and *song*, a verbal branch of music, naturally can address different aspects of life. Songs entertain, heal, educate, inform, evoke emotions, among other functions (Firdaus, 2013; Gayen et al., 2021; Juslin, 2001, 2013; Ransom, 2015). Inarguably, language is vital in the above-listed functions; and singing the correct lyrics is vital. Moreover, in a religious setting, lyrics sometimes function as a means for the proclamation of the gospel and the rudiments of moral life besides the usual rubrics of Western missiology (Asuquo, 2000).

A burgeoning literature on Ghanaian songs usually focuses on textual themes and linguistic semantics (Acquah et al., 2015; Adinkrah, 2008; Agyekum et al., 2020; Amuah & Wuaku, 2019; van der Geest & Asante-Darko, 1982). Furthermore, choral and highlife songs become the object of interest in the above research. Few studies have focused on the text of Ghanaian songs (Maclean, 2018; Maclean & Acquah, 2020); however, they also focused on choral art music compositions. Research on the lyrics of gospel songs is yet to gain attention in Ghanaian music scholarship. It is common knowledge that many Ghanaian gospel songs are considered folk songs because the composers are not known. Most of these songs are lyrically rendered differently by different performers; besides, there are no written documents to justify the correct lyrics. The performers of these songs usually do not always look out for the original lyrics; hence, they learn and sing whatever they hear at church or on the airwaves, be it right or wrong. However, this lyrical disparity alters the original meaning and purpose of the song, which sometimes causes biblical errors. Interestingly, every song has its structure, meaning, and aesthetics.

It is truistic that every songwriter or composer has an intent and purpose for composing any particular song. Unfortunately, there are some occasions where the users distort the songwriter's intent. For instance, the last phrase of the lyrics of one of the popular Ghanaian gospel songs, *Onyame, Wo na yebe som Wo* (God, You are the one we will worship). Some say *yebe som Wo daa daa* (we will worship you forever), others also say *abɔfo som Wo daa daa* (angels worship you forever). This disparity, however, creates some form of confusion among singers and listeners. Moreover, as stated earlier, composers of some of these songs are usually unknown, and besides, there is no written document to justify the correct lyrics.

It is worth noting that the songs of Elder S.K. Ampiah, an iconic songwriter of Ghanaian Christian music, are no exception to the above phenomenon. A preliminary investigation reveals that some of his popular gospel songs are lyrically distorted. It is also quite surprising that his popular gospel songs are considered anonymous composers (Coffie, 2020). Despite Elder S.K. Ampiah's iconicity in Ghanaian Christian music, few attempts have been made to investigate his lyrical intent. For instance, in an interview on Citi TV in 2020, Elder S.K. Ampiah lamented how gospel artists and the general populace have wrongly sung his song lyrics. These lyrical distortions usually do not transmit a complete and meaningful message to the listener (Amuah, 2012; Coffie, 2020). Given the above, the study investigates and documents Elder S.K. Ampiah's lyrical intent of his selected popular gospel songs and also postulates reasons for his choice of lyrics to ameliorate the problem of *lyrical distortion*. This study defines *lyrical distortion* as misrepresenting the songwriter or composer's lyrical intent, while lyrics are the words underlying a melody. Also, see Coffie (2020) for more biographical information on Elder S.K. Ampiah.

II. METHOD

The study adopted a descriptive research design, where a description of lexical-pragmatic strategies from selected Elder S.K. Ampiah's Christian song lyrics were done. This design was suitable for this study because the researcher mainly relied on textual analysis. Textual analysis is a type of qualitative research in which a researcher interprets documents to give voice and meaning to an assessment topic (Bowen, 2009). Therefore, interviews, documents, and audio reviews were employed for data collection. Six popular gospel songs of Elder S.K. Ampiah, which have been distorted lyrically, were selected using the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a technique where a researcher can use cases with the required information concerning the study's objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). Next, the sampled songs were transcribed musically and textually. Also, for illustration, the selected songs were transcribed in the key of F major. The transcriptions became the basis for textual analyses of the songs to show how the lyrics have been distorted. Finally, the findings were contrasted to the view of Elder S.K. Ampiah, the songwriter. Notice that the lyrics of the selected songs are in the Akan language¹.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Selected Popular Gospel Songs of Elder S.K. Ampiah

Nipa Nyinaa Rehwehwe Wo

(Humanity Seeks You)

S.K Ampiah

Ni - pa nyi-naa re - hwe - hwe wo _____ A - gyen - kwa Ye - su _____

5
 — a - de - bone - ye - fo re - twen wo _____ a - ya - re - fo re - frɛ - wo _____ wi - a - se hia

10
 wo'n kwa - gye _____ ni - pa - nyi - naa re - hwe - hwe wo _____ wo re - hwe - hwe wo A - gyen - kwa Ye -

15
 su wo re - hwe - hwe wo A - gyen - kwa - Ye - su ɔ - bon - sam re - sei wia - se _____

19
 — ni - pa nyi - naa re - hwe - hwe wo _____

Fig. 1.

3.2 Nipa Nyinaa Rehwehwe Wo – Song Text

Text

Nipa nyinaa rehwehwe Wo
 Agyenkwa Yesu
 Adeboneyefo retwen Wo
 Ayarefo refre Wo
 Wiase hia Wo nkwagye
 Nipa nyinaa rehwehwe Wo
 Wo rehwehwe Wo
 Agyenkwa Yesu
 Wo rehwehwe Wo
 Agyenkwa Yesu
 ɔbonsam resei wiase,
 Nipa nyinaa rehwehwe Wo

English Translation

Humanity is in search of you
 Jesus, the saviour
 Sinners await you
 The sick are calling you
 The world needs your salvation
 Humanity is in search of you
 They are in search of you
 Jesus, the saviour
 They are in search of you
 Jesus, the saviour
 Satan is destroying the world
 Humanity is in search of you

As shown in figure 1 above, the theme of the song's lyrics is: humanity is searching for Jesus Christ because Satan is destroying the world. Therefore, the only solution or saviour to the teeming problems of the world is Jesus Christ. It is also not quite surprising that the first and last lines of the song's lyrics entrench this message. It is worth noting that the songwriter in lines three and four of the lyrics enumerates the category of people searching for the salvation of Jesus Christ, such as the sinners and the sick. Furthermore, the songwriter informs that the sinners are waiting for Jesus' salvation while the sick are calling Jesus for deliverance or healing. Unfortunately, the information in line four of the song's lyrics has been distorted among the Ghanaian Christian fraternity as intended by the songwriter. Presently, line four of the song's lyrics inform that the sick are *waiting*² instead of *calling*. Soul Winners, a popular Ghanaian gospel group, first recorded and released this song, distorting the lyrics in 2003, prevalent until today. It is a truism that this distortion of the songwriter's intent is inconsequential and does not alter the meaning of the theme. However, the songwriter's intent to

communicate to the listener about the sick calling on Jesus for deliverance or healing is absent. According to Elder S.K. Ampiah, the songwriter, it is quite usual for a person in need to call for assistance than to wait for assistance. However, this view of the songwriter encourages the afflicted listener to call on Jesus for salvation instead of waiting.

Nyame Ye Nyame Kese

(God is a Great God)

S.K Ampiah

O Nya me ye Nyame ke se se wo twere noa w'a -

7
nim ren gua - se da O Nya me ye Nyame ke se

Fig. 2.

3.3 *Onyame Ye Nyame Kese* – Song Text

Text

Onyame ye Nyame kese
Se wo tweren 'a, w'anin renguase da
Halleluyah, Onyame ye Nyame kese

English Translation

God is a great God
You will not be disgraced when you lean on Him
Halleluia, God is a great God

The song in figure 2 above employs relatively fewer lyrics; it is inarguably one of the most popular Ghanaian Christian worship songs with different renditions by Several gospel musicians. The theme of the song's lyrics is: God is Great; hence you will not be disgraced or disappointed when you lean or depend on Him. In the first line of the song's lyrics, the songwriter communicates to the listener that *God is a great God*. However, it has been distorted and sung among the Ghanaian Christian fraternity as *God is good³, God is great*. This distortion could be attributed to the mixture of two linguistic traditions (Twi and Fante). It is also worth noting that the songwriter wrote the song's lyrics in the Twi language, where the word, *ye*, has multiple meanings such as (is, good, do); however, *ye* (is) was the songwriter's intent. It appears that over time, the song users began to sing *ye*, meaning (good) in the Fante language instead of *ye* (is) in the Twi language. This little twist in the song's lyrics distorted the songwriter's intent. So, presently, the first line of the song's lyrics communicates to the listener that *Onyame ye, Nyame kese* (God is good, God is great) instead of *Onyame ye Nyame kese* (God is a great God) as intended by the songwriter. It is worth noting that the distortion of the song's lyrics, similar to the song in figure 1, is inconsequential and does not alter the meaning of the theme. Elder S.K. Ampiah also acknowledged that the distortion of the first line of the song's lyrics is not a *bad* idea; just that was not his intent.

Mmo Yesu Mmo (Well Done, Jesus)

Composer: S.K Ampiah

Mo-mma yen ma Ye - su mmo na w'a ye'a de ke se'a ma yen

5
ɔ de ne mo-gya to yen w'a ma ye nya'n kwa'e nni'e wie mo ma ye ma Ye - su

10
mmo na w'a ye'a de ke se'a ma yen mmo Ye - su mmo mmo ye - su

16
mmo mmo Ye - su mmo Ye - su ye ma w'a mmo

Fig. 3.

3.4 Mmo Yesu Mmo – Song Text

Text

Momma yen ma Yesu mmo,
Na w'aye ade kese ama yen
ɔde ne mogya ato yen
w'ama ye nyankwa enniwie
Momma yen maYesu mmo
Na w'aye ade kese ama yen
Mmo Yesu mmo, mmoYesu mmo
Mmo Yesu mmo, Yesu ye ma w'ammo

English Translation

Let us congratulate Jesus
For He has done great things for us
He has purchased us with His blood
He has given us eternal life
Let us congratulate Jesus
For He has done great things for us
Well done, Jesus, Well done, Jesus
Well done, Jesus; we congratulate you, Jesus

The song in figure 3 above is one of Ghana's most popular gospel praise songs, and it is usually sung during Christian gatherings. The theme of the song's lyrics is: Jesus Christ is worthy of our congratulations or praises for the great things He has done. The songwriter further gives reasons why Jesus Christ is worthy of our praise, such as purchasing us with His blood and giving us eternal life. In this song, the lyrics were not necessarily distorted compared to figures 1 and 2. However, the third and fourth lines of the lyrics are omitted in how the song is sung in Ghana⁴. The omission inadvertently has a grave consequence on the theme of the song's lyrics, which does not communicate a complete and meaningful message to the listener as the songwriter intended. Elder S.K. Ampiah explaining his intent of the song, narrates: *Jesus Christ purchased us with His blood and gave us eternal life, which is why we praise Him*. It is also quite unusual for people to share their memorable moments without outlining the reasons for them. It is against this background that the songwriter's lyrical intent is very appropriate.

Jewfo Wɔn Hen (King of the Jews)

Composer: S.K Ampiah

mo'n bra'n be hwe no ɔ-ye Ye - su Ye-su Kris-to de ɔ-y'ɔ Sa - Hen

9
mo'n bra'n be hwe no Jew - fo wɔn Hen ne din ne Ye - su ɔ-y'ɔ Sa - Hen

Fig. 4.

3.5 JewfoWɔn Hen Song Text

Text

*Mon bra nbehwe No, ɔye Yesu
 Yesu Kristo de ɔy'ɔsahen
 Mon bra nbehwe No, Jewfo wɔn Hen
 Ne din ne Yesu, ɔy'ɔsahen*

English Translation

Come and see Him, He is Jesus
 As for Jesus Christ, He is a Warrior
 Come and see Him, King of the Jews
 His name is Jesus, He is a Warrior

The song in figure 4 above also employs relatively fewer lyrics; however, it is inarguably one of the most distorted song lyrics of the songwriter among the Christian fraternity in Ghana. In the theme of the song's lyrics, the songwriter proclaims Jesus Christ as a Warrior and King of the Jews and makes a clarion call for everyone to have an encounter with Him. In the first line of the song's lyrics, the songwriter makes a clarion call for everyone to come and see (have an encounter with) Jesus. Presently, in the lyrics, *Jesus* has been substituted with *Warrior*⁵. In the second line of the song's lyrics, the songwriter describes Jesus Christ as a *Warrior*; however, presently, the song's lyrics only mentions Jesus' name and does not describe who He is. In the third line of the song's lyrics, the songwriter repeats the clarion call and proclaims Jesus Christ as the *King of the Jews*. The phrase *King of the Jews* presently has been substituted with *King of Kings*. It is worth noting that the fourth line of the song's lyrics, as intended by the songwriter, has not changed, except that singers usually use Jesus instead of *Yesu* in the *Akan* language. Examining the above song lyrics, it is obvious that the distortion did not alter the meaning of the theme. However, the song's lyrics in lines one and two as sung presently are quite redundant because no new information was introduced. Elder S.K. Ampiah contends that the sense of the chronological description of Jesus Christ as a Warrior and King of the Jews, which is his intent, has been altered in present times.

M'agyenkwa Pa

(My Saviour)

S.K Ampiah



Fig. 5.

3.6 M'agyenkwa Pa Song Text

Text

*Mede W'ayeyi rebre wo
 M'agyenkwa pa, m'agyenkwa pa
 W'anhwe me bɔne ne me endi
 W'ama'dekyep'ato me
 Mede W'ayeyi rebre wo
 M'agyenkwa pa, m'agyenkwa pa*

English Translation

I bring you praise
 My saviour, my saviour
 You did not deal with me according to my sins
 You have given me a new day
 I bring you praise
 My saviour, my saviour

The song in figure 5 above is one of the popular worship songs among the Ghanaian Christian fraternity. In the theme of the song lyrics, the songwriter praises his saviour for not punishing him according to his sins. Furthermore, the songwriter also expresses his gratitude for waking up to a new day. In the fourth line of the song's lyrics, the songwriter communicates to the listener how his saviour (God) did not punish him according to his sins, showing how merciful God has been to him. Unfortunately, as in the lyrics, the word sins has been replaced with *mistakes* or *errors*⁶ presently. A rendition of this song by Vine Praise, a Ghanaian gospel group, is an example of the lyrical distortion. As indicated earlier in the song's lyrics, the substitution of *sins* for *mistakes* may sound inconsequential; however, the songwriter was emphatic and intentional in his choice of words. It is worth noting that not every mistake is a sin; thus, *sin* and *mistake* cannot mean the same. *Everybody is liable to mistakes as humans, which may not necessarily be considered sins* as Elder S.K. Ampiah informs.

Notice that the biblical quotation: *He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities* (Psalm 103:10) inspired the songwriter in this song's lyrics; therefore, substituting the word sins for mistakes may cause a biblical error.

Yesu Ne Wo
The Death of Jesus Composer: S.K. Ampiah

Fig. 6.

3.7 Yesu Ne Wu

Text

*Yesu ne wu no na w'ama menya nkwa
Ne perakro mu na me nya m'ayaresa
Ne Mogya no na wa hohro me bone
Yesu ne wun'agye me kraa
Mede me ma na mmo
Mmo mmo mmo, mmo mmo mmo mmo*

*Yesu Kristo mmo mmo mmo
Mede me ma na mmo*

English Translation

The death of Jesus has given me life
By His stripes, I am healed
His blood has watched my sin
The death of Jesus has redeemed me forever
As for me, I congratulate Him
Well done, well done, well done, well done, well done, well done, well done
Well done, Jesus, well done, well done
As for me, I congratulate Him

The song in figure 6 above is a popular Ghanaian Pentecostal praise song. It is also one of the many songs of Elder S.K. Ampiah, which the composer is considered anonymous. The theme of this song's lyrics is quite similar to that of figure 3, where the songwriter praises Jesus Christ and gives reasons why Jesus deserves his praise. In the first line of the song's lyrics, the phrase: *the death of Jesus* is substituted with *the blood of Jesus*⁷. Also, in the fourth line of the song's lyrics, instead of *the blood of Jesus has redeemed me forever*, it is presently sung *the blood of Jesus has redeemed me* as exemplified in the fourth album of Kofi Abraham, a renowned Ghanaian gospel musician. It is worth noting that the word *forever* is absent from how the song is sung presently. Similar to the song lyrics discussed above, the distortion of this song's lyrics does not alter the theme. However, the songwriter's intent about the chronology of events that culminate in his absolute redemption by the death of Jesus Christ, such as being wounded and shedding blood, is obviously missing in how the song is sung presently.

IV. CONCLUSION

In Ghana, it has become a common practice where church praise and worship singers learn and sing certain portions of existing songs, record, and release for public consumption. Once such a song is released, the listeners assume that as a complete song and sing likewise. As a result, many popular Ghanaian gospel songs have lyrical discrepancies. However, for this study's gamut, I focused on the selected popular gospel songs of Elder S.K. Ampiah. The findings of this study confirmed that the lyrics of Elder S.K. Ampiah's popular gospel songs have been distorted over the years by recording artists. This distortion is partly due to the oral tradition of song transmission from one generation to another. In addition, recording artists perceive the songs as folk (anonymous composers); therefore, they do not follow due diligence to learn the songwriter's intent. Surprisingly, these distortions, more often than not, do not alter the theme of the lyrics; however, they sometimes cause biblical errors. Furthermore, the songwriter's intent is also defeated, and sometimes the song

lyrics do not transmit and communicate a complete meaningful message to the listener. I, therefore, recommend that recording artists and singers should as much as possible investigate and keep to the intent of the songwriter to ameliorate the problem of *lyrical distortion*.

Notes

- ¹One of the linguistic traditions of Ghana
²URL link to the distorted song lyrics <https://youtu.be/IArqcveMvTo?t=1002>
³URL link to the distorted song lyrics <https://youtu.be/Nw3saufSE3g>
⁴URL link to the distorted song lyrics <https://youtu.be/G33mx2wvfrw?t=83>
⁵URL link to the distorted song lyrics <https://youtu.be/8JmHdhHmRDc?t=4081>
⁶URL link to the distorted song lyrics <https://youtu.be/pHqBejs-71w>
⁷URL link to the distorted song lyrics <https://youtu.be/o3CN9mH6x1w>

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