

Atenteben: A Legacy of Ephraim AMU

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Abstract: Ephraim Amu, among Music scholars, has contributed very richly to the development of atenteben as an instrument in music scholarship and performance. Amu was an astute music professional whose experience in atenteben production as well as music theory has imputed immensely to the growth of the instrument and its music in Ghana. The study was approached through narrative research and was hinged on Kramer's theory of cultural fusion. Indeed, Amu's initiative to upgrade the standard of atenteben and conventionalize it has left remarkable footprints for academia while providing job opportunities for the learners and producers of the instrument. It is suggested that learning to play atenteben is encouraged at the primary school level while advocating for industrialized mass production of the instrument.

Keywords: Ephraim Amu, Atenteben, legacy, cultural fusion, aerophone

1. INTRODUCTION

Some scholars describe Amu as the father of Ghanaian Art music (Agordoh, 2004; Herbst, Zaidel-Rudolph & Onyeji, 2003) as he led art music compositions for formal performances in schools and churches. As a great composer of his time, he also formalized the construction and the development of a bamboo flute called *Atenteben* and composed lots of simple tunes for it. It is this *Atenteben* that has become a great heritage for Ghana, a legacy that is worth receiving scholarly writings. It is a gain saying that Amu's legacy was not about only the development of the *Atenteben* instrument. Many scholars have given exposure of his educational life, musical styles, his experiences and contributions to the development of Ghanaian musical life (Laryea, 2005; Flolu, 2004, Nketia, 1998; Agawu, 1996/1987). Indeed, the *Atenteben* legacy is just one of the many successes he made towards the growth of the Ghanaian musical heritage. In this article, I hinge on Kramer's theory of cultural fusion to discuss the *Atenteben* and its music as a legacy of Ephraim Kwaku Amu through content and narrative analyses. Such views from persons experiencing the instrument either in its production, distribution and consumption were interviewed to ascertain the extent of the impact of this legacy of Ephraim Amu.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF ATENTEBEN

The *Atenteben* is one of the aerophones which belongs to the *atenteben* family with another one called *odurogya* (an end-blown reed instrument found at the court of Asantehene).

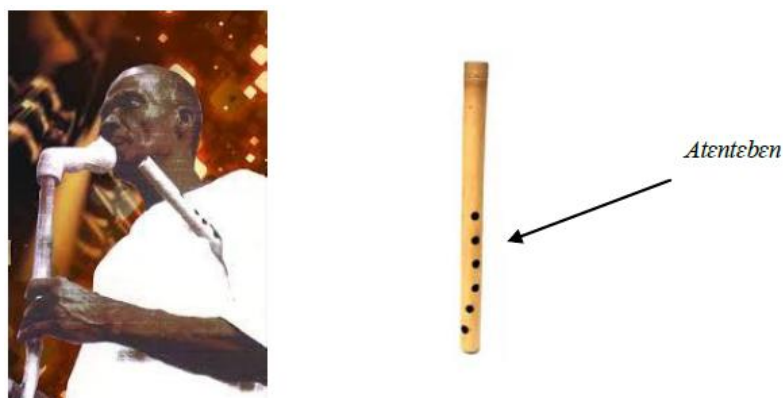


Fig1. Ephraim Amu blowing the odurogya with the atenteben in his armpit

The origin of *atenteben* is obscure as it cannot be traced to a single source. It was originally known as *atente* as a musical type of the Akan, Kwahu area of Ghana, specifically, Twenedurase. According to oral history, the people of Twenedurase, led by their chief, Kumnipa went searching for a god called Senya Kopo and went as far as Sampa, now in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana. It was alleged to be a god of Sampa and the *atente* constituted the highlife for worshipping the god. The Kwahu people who went on the trip with their chief to Sampa learnt to play the instrument. Upon their return home the *atente* ensemble was formed.

Another school of thought has it that the Asante and Kwahu invaded Yendi and saw the instrument there. They learnt to play it and adopted it into their musical tradition. Information from yet another source alleged that when the Asante and Kwahu fought in Togoland, a woman suggested they should celebrate their victory with a new kind of music from a bamboo instrument. It could be inferred from these historical accounts that the origin of *atenteben* is linked to the Kwahu and the Asante states.

3. THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptual framework of the study was hinged to Kramer's theory of cultural fusion (Kramer, 2011) which favours the argument that the old is not lost but is presumed and is necessary for integrating the new. As information accrues the individual and the community are enriched. Amu believed firmly in the beauty of African Music and culture (Laughlin, 2000). The strong desire to study one's own culture pioneered by Amu has influenced advocates of *atenteben* who went further to expand the capabilities of the instrument. Cultural continuity and preservation is indeed significant but innovations are bound to occur in the process of development. Although continuity and stability in musical practice go a long way to enhancing or ensuring the preservation of the rich cultural heritage of any society, change is inevitable in every aspect of life (Aibuedefe & Abolagba, 2014).

It must be stated that in terms of invention of fingering systems of the holes to produce the desired sound, there were some attempts by Nana Danso Abiam and Henaku-Pobi to improve the range and capabilities of the instrument (Laughlin, 2000), however, it has not been accessible to students in academia and has remained with their performing group. Similarly, some *atenteben* music composers and performers from the older generation came close to preserving *atenteben* heritage but did not adhere to rigorous academic models nor did they theorize their innovations. It was Amu who ventured into serious formalization of the instruments to attain the current development. Biographic records of Ephraim Amu as an African music legend, point to his interaction with the Kwahu community in Ghana when he was posted to teach at Akropong Teacher Training College in 1927 (Agordoh, 2002/2004). Ephraim Amu came into contact with the *atente* among the Kwahu. While at Akropong, Amu saw and admired the native bamboo *atente* which had four finger holes. Amu later went to Kumasi where he obtained permission from the Asantehene-Nana Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II to learn how to play the *odurogya*, under the instructions of Opanin Opoku Mensah (Vordzorgbe, 2013). He took advantage of the privilege granted him to learn other instruments and dances including the *atente*.

In addition to Amu's monumental accomplishments as a composer of choral works, he ventured into new paths hitherto untrodden (Agordoh, 2004). He researched for over thirty years into Ghanaian musical instruments and all musical types, all the time seeking to improve on them in the light of his musical knowledge acquired both at home and abroad. Consequently he developed the *atenteben* instrument from the *atente* ensemble which he developed into the new model we have now based on his knowledge in Western music. Considering the transversal way of playing traditional *atenteben* rather awkward, he introduced the vertical way of playing the *atenteben* as practiced currently. This has inspired many composers to build on the foundation laid by increasing the stock of scores available for the instrument which facilitates the preservation of the *atenteben* instrument. Adjahoe (2013) for instance has provided in-depth conventional fingering techniques, particularly for chromatic notes, thereby increasing the capability of the instrument.

The process of change in terms of the construction of the instrument and the development of its playing capabilities were however initiated by Dr. Amu. This was corroborated by Aibuedefe & Abolagba (2014) in the assertion that some aspects of African culture including music have changed or been modified to meet contemporary situations. Such innovation is evident in the inclusion of *atenteben* in jazz band music and in the Pan African Orchestra. All these developments on the *atenteben* and its music have ultimately yielded economic development among producers, teachers

and performers of the instrument. One of the producers of *atenteben*, trained by Dr. Amu, although elderly now, continues to earn a living from the vocation (Laughlin, 2000). The skill of this craftsman who is highly motivated to continue manufacturing the instrument becomes crucial in the sustenance of such a rich legacy. Composers and performers may be committed to their arts but they depend on the availability of *atenteben* to put their art on stage. Consequently, such a tremendous achievement requires due recognition which generations in the music discipline will continue to perpetuate.

4. THE APPROACH

The study sought to investigate experiences and their impact on the life of producers, performers, teachers and composers of the *atenteben* and therefore dictated that qualitative narrative research be utilised. After taking this decision I compiled a semi-structured interview schedule based on the research problem. That is exploration of the development of *atenteben* and its music as a legacy of Ephraim Kweku Amu. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) confirm that “narrative inquiry is a valid method of understanding experience”(p.20), and so by employing this type of research I was able to acquire a deeper understanding of the narrations of the participants to determine the extent to which this legacy has had impact on the Ghanaian society. In selecting the participants for the study, stratified sampling was employed to derive respondents for the study. Hence, four (4) *atenteben* producers and distributors were selected; two by snow ball and two by purposive sampling. Four (4) composers of *atenteben* music were also derived by convenient sampling while ten (10) performers of the instruments from the Music Education Department of the University of Education, Winneba, were sampled at random. These students usually perform the instrument at the various performance programmes initiated by the Department. In-depth interview and observation were adopted as the data collection techniques for the study.

Proceeding from there, I went to the producers who are also distributors themselves for them to narrate and share their experiences with the production and the distribution of the instrument with me. In their narration, they talked about how they enrolled in the production activity. Four composers of the music were also interviewed to know the extent they have been composing and especially share their thoughts on such a legacy by Amu with me. The performers were also observed in their engaged and pre-arranged performances. This was to help me determine their dexterity in the fingering system established by Amu. Performers were also asked about the various employable benefits they were getting from their performances of the instrument and its music. I was able to portray with a high degree of accuracy what I observed and heard from the interview.

The participants’ responses were recorded and transcribed and this enabled me gain much insight into how the formalization of the instrument by Ephraim Amu has become a legacy for future generations to come. The narrative method was very effective to allow the participants unearth their experiences. With the assistance of a tape recorder, content and narrative analyses were made with prior permission from the participants. The use of the tape recorder allowed me to listen to the responses and the narrations again and again to capture the exact meaning and implications of the narratives.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the instruments of the *atenteben* family credited to Amu, *atenteben* has stood the test of the time despite exogenous forces and influence of modernity. Amu originally developed a diatonic system of playing *atenteben* which continues to enjoy high usage in educational institutions at all levels from primary to tertiary. One of the producers for instance stated:

“Amu’s efforts were taken to a higher level by Nana Abiam Danso and Mr. Henaku-Pobi who developed the chromatic system of playing atenteben prevalent in non-academic circles”.(Personal communication)

The chromatic system is very complex as it relies mainly on cross-fingering, half-holing and overblowing to achieve the right pitch levels (Laughlin, 2000). Personal communication I had with Ishmael Arhinful indicated that the fingering system developed by Amu is being upheld. He stated

“This system of playing atenteben (used by the Pan African Orchestra) is currently employed by Hewale Sounds (a neo-traditional musical group) led by Mr. Dela Botri, a student of Nana Abiam Danso. Full capabilities of the instrument are exposed by the chromatic system such that the atenteben is able to play in any key in over two octaves depending on the performer (Personal communication with Ishmael Arhinful, a professional teacher, formerly of Hewale sounds).

In the traditional contextual settings *atenteben* is prevalent at funeral ceremonies which are common among the Akan speaking communities borrowed by the Ewe and Ga ethnic groups. Accompanying the reading of tributes to a deceased person with *atenteben* music in the background is widespread in Ghana. The most popular dirge for this purpose is *Akwasi Fori* composed by Amu.



Example1. Excerpt from *Akwasi Fori*

The incorporation of *atenteben* music into the reading of tributes of a deceased at a funeral has stimulated the composition of new tunes as dirges by several music scholars to enhance Amu's legacy. Notable among them are *Obaakofo Ankonam* by Aduonum, *Dagadu* by Mereku and *Ayakor* by Ebeli (2013).



Example2. Excerpt from *Aya Kor*

The art of integrating *atenteben* music into popular genres and examination makes it enchanting and beneficial. Consequently several musical genres in Ghana in recent times comfortably accommodate *atenteben* to create a fusion. Notable among them are pop music, highlife, jazz, classical, traditional, as well as neo-traditional music (Laughlin, 2000). This becomes more evident on stage during Lunch-time concert series in the Department of Music Education at the University of Education, Winneba where students explore the use of *atenteben* in the fusion of other instruments studied as part of their course work. Moreso, *atenteben* is a popular instrument among music students both at the University of Ghana (Laughlin, 2000) and University of Education, Winneba. In my experience as a lecturer and instructor of the instrument at the University of Education, Winneba, students are obliged to study skills in playing *atenteben* during the first semester of the first year. However, when the window is opened for the choice of a major instrument at the second semester, about a third of the students opt for *atenteben*. This has positively impacted on its popularity among secondary schools who also opt for *atenteben* as a major instrument in their practical performance test.

It could be inferred from the foregoing that *atenteben* has gained popularity in Ghana especially in secondary schools and universities where students opt it as a major instrument. Both students and performers justify their choice of the instrument by the assertion that it has a beautiful timbre with piano accompaniment. For most of the students, the instrument is affordable, portable, easy to learn using the diatonic system and above all, brings economic gains within a brief period of study.

5.1. Impact of *Atenteben* Legacy on Ghanaian Society

Four stake holders (the producers of *atenteben*, the composers of the music, teachers and performers of *atenteben* music) have been identified as benefactors of Amu's legacy. One of the reasons Amu is regarded as the father of Ghanaian Art music is that he was the first Ghanaian to build African music by writing the Western type of harmony with African rhythm, a technique completely unknown before his time. This transcended choral music compositions to *atenteben* music as demonstrated in

his piece titled Pipes and drums for *atenteben* I and II with percussion accompaniment, *Miatɔ agblema* in C for *odurogya* and *atenteben* I and II and many others. Amu's pioneering efforts in laying a foundation of how African rhythmic motifs should be organized was demonstrated in his works. These quickly impacted the skills of successive composers for the instrument like Nketia who wrote a few tunes such as *Quarter No. 1 and 2* as well as a *Trio for Violin, atenteben* and *bassoon*. Another proponent of *atenteben* music composition is Aduonum, who went further to write a manuscript on the fingering techniques for *atenteben* and *odurogya*. This is a step which has brought to light Amu's diatonic fingering system for preservation since the manuscript is lodged at an institutional library (ICAMD library at Legon) as a reference material. Adjahoe (2013) has gone a step further to expose learners to compositional techniques that encompass the use of B^b *atenteben* as a solo instrument and an instrument that blends well with piano accompaniment in an ensemble.

Motivated by a new wave of high enrolment of students in schools and universities to study Music and the reawakening of culturalism in education (Flolu & Amuah, 2003) contemporary composers have sought to write music for *atenteben* with piano accompaniment. Notable among them are Mereku who wrote *Atentenata, Nyatsiame* and *Ano-Owusua* while he provided piano accompaniment to Nketia's *Quartet No. 1*. Driven by the quest to promote the study of *atenteben* as an instrument in academia, and Amu's legacy, Ebeli published ten (10) *atenteben* compositions with piano accompaniment (Ebeli, 2013) some of which serve as examination pieces for music students at the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE). A prolific composer in choral music E.O. Acquah has found interest in *atenteben* music and has *Ama Adoma*, also an examination piece for WASSCE to his credit. For most of these composers writing music for *atenteben* gives them professional and academic fulfillment as well as the opportunity to build on the foundation laid by Amu and their predecessors. Although these composers may not enjoy any financial gains their works are enhancement to their career since all find themselves teaching Music in the universities. Amu was also a professional teacher while practicing the musical arts. *Atenteben* as an instrument and its music on the other hand gives room for the manufacturers, performers and teachers to be financially enhanced. It provides job prospects for them. One of the producers, who learnt the vocation from Amu was able to supply about four thousand five hundred (4,500) pieces of *atenteben* to schools and universities in 2017. He reports that production of *atenteben* is good business except that the manual skills employed in every stage of manufacturing delays the process and this exerts undue pressure on him when the demand is high at the beginning of the academic year when fresh students need to acquire the instrument.

The other three supplied two thousand two hundred (2,200), one thousand eight hundred and fifty (1,850) and one thousand six hundred and fifty (1,650) pieces of *atenteben* to schools and individuals. Out of the four producers of the instrument, one is a professional graduate Music teacher with a regular income. However the production of *atenteben* supplements his income. Another producer, a graduate teacher in Music also earns additional income from the vocation. The other two engage in the manufacturing of *atenteben* as a full-time job while they engage in petty trading and subsistence farming as extra income generating activities. It could be inferred from the foregoing that the production of *atenteben* is strengthened by the financial remuneration attached to it. Teachers of the instrument thereby benefit from the availability of the instrument as new students require their services on commercial basis. It could be said that *atenteben* production is a business and its functions are evident in every direction to create and maintain a progressive growth in the field of musical arts in Ghana.

Furthermore, music composition and performance are two complimentary areas of specialization in the musical arts, in that while performance brings composed works to life, without composition there would be nothing to perform (Osayande, 2012). Hence, performers of *atenteben* music at funerals and other occasions rely on composers for their repertoire. Most of the performers acknowledge Amu for setting the pace for his contemporaries by writing Akwasi Fori, the most popular funeral dirge, and his successors for writing additional melodies that endow them with economic gains. One of the respondents, an African Music major who commercialized *atenteben* playing at funerals confirms that the proceeds from one funeral engagement could sustain him on campus for more than one week while concerts also provide a good source of income. Another respondent teaches school children during long vacations for a fee. He believes that the foundation work of Amu and the efforts by his cohorts have provided him a job ahead of his graduation from the university.

It is worth noting that some of the performers are amateurs who do not read musical score but are capable of demonstrating dexterity on the instrument. These performers learn their pieces by ear, an approach which according to Laughlin (2000) favoured him because his experience in learning the Irish traditional flute was based primarily in aural. Having music notated for performance has its merits but performers who are unable to read music score should be encouraged to practice their art while making effort to enrich their skills with music notation.

6. CONCLUSION

Ephraim Amu has been particularly renowned as an exponent of African culture (Fololu & Amuah, 2003). This statement is in the perspective of culture as all the elements of a person's environment which are also part of daily life. The sound of *atenteben* music in contemporary Ghana is pervasive from the middle belt to the southern zone of the country while making slow incursions into the northern regions. With reference to a legacy clinched to the concept of a thing that happened in the past and can be used later in a different way, it could be said that *atenteben* currently is the most popular traditional melodic instrument in Ghana which has found its way into academic discourse. From the time of the development of *atenteben* to its current standard it has become an integral part of Ghanaian traditional music and, to a lesser extent, contemporary music. Amu has left a legacy which has extended from traditional idiom to neo-traditional music (Laughlin, 2000).

Although the development of the capacity of *atenteben* to play the diatonic scales and music is Amu's legacy, the fusion of *atenteben* into jazz, orchestra and popular music is largely credited to Nana Abiam Danso and Henaku-Pobi (Adjahoe, 2013; Laughlin, 2000). It could be inferred that these music scholars built on the foundation work of Amu by developing a fingering technique which produces chromatic notes thereby extending the capabilities of *atenteben* to compete with the Western flute. It is obvious that there have been some changes in the uses and capabilities of *atenteben* but maintaining its original uses of playing in traditional *atenteben* bands with light percussion and at funeral services. Consequently, these changes in the improvement of the instrument have tremendously impacted the music fraternity financially. This has provided job opportunities for the youth, thereby making them economically sound and independent. It is also evident that the producer of *atenteben*, the composer of the melodies, the teacher and the performer of the music are all symbolic collaborators of Amu's legacy. All the four collaborators are the sides of the same rectangle, for without one the other three are incomplete. It is therefore important for the four angles of the legacy to have close affinity among themselves through greater collaboration, consultation and co-operation to sustain and foster mutually beneficial environment for *atenteben* legacy to thrive.

The legacy of *atenteben* makes a rich history of innovation worth studying in terms of construction, playing technique and the music it is used for. Contributing to the development of Amu's *atenteben* legacy are Nana Abiam Danso, Henaku-Pobi, producers, composers, teachers and performers of *atenteben* music. This is in fulfillment of Amu's vision of *atenteben* holding its own place in an orchestra as evident in the fusion of *atenteben* in jazz and neo-traditional genres other than traditional *atenteben* bands or funeral dirges. Amu's effort to bring *atenteben* and its music to a standard status has greatly influenced and impacted all stake holders positively. Consequently *atenteben* has assumed a permanent place as an examination instrument in second cycle schools and tertiary institutions across Ghana. What prominently remains as footprints of Amu's legacy is the volume of *atenteben* scores, published and unpublished, available in schools and universities. Indeed, it is the efforts by Amu to develop *atenteben* instrument and its music that gave the later generation a high level of motivation to sustain the legacy with innovation. In view of the high demand of *atenteben* in schools and among traditional societies it is hereby suggested that music scholars should collaborate with technical institutions to mechanize the production of the instrument on a large scale. The returns of mass production may be beneficial to basic school pupils who can easily acquire their instruments while educational policy makers may consider encouraging the learning of *atenteben* which although is part of the Creative Arts Syllabus has not been actualized in all schools.

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