



Ghana Popular Music 1931-1957

<http://www.scientific-african.org/ghanahighlife>

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Project Description and Proposal: Digitising the UTC-Recordings in the archives of Mission 21

SYNOPSIS

The project aims at preserving and rendering accessible an important collection of Shellac records with West African music housed in the archives of Mission 21 (Basel Mission holdings) in Basel. This collection is outstanding for its scope and quality. It forms part of the Ghanaian and Nigerian national heritage and represents a rich source for the study of African history and cultures. Easy access to the collection is to be guaranteed by digitising the sound. The data will be transcribed on sets of recordable compact discs. An electronic database provides the user with a tool to find the titles searched for. A website where this database can be searched and, ultimately, the recordings can be downloaded will facilitate the access to the collection in the countries of origin and world-wide. A pilot project which was completed in January 2002 has proven the feasibility and interest of such an endeavour.

INTRODUCTION

The 905 Shellac records housed in the archives of Mission 21 in Basel contain African popular music, which was recorded by the Union Trading Company of Basel, Switzerland (UTC) in Ghana and Nigeria between 1931 and 1957. The collection features 728 titles, some of them unreleased heretofore.

When UTC stopped its activities in autumn 2000 the records were transferred to the Basel Mission archives (now part of Bildungszentrum 21 and Mission 21) where they are stored in the intermediary archives. The transfer to this location makes sense as historically the Union Trading Company was linked to the Basel Mission. The new location will allow for free access once the recordings have been transferred to a new medium. In their present state the handling of the Shellac records is risky and too labour-intensive to allow for everyday access.

As the Basel Mission archives have been involved in a pioneering project digitising its famous photographic collection and are about to conclude this project in October 2002, a new project of a similar character can not be started by the archives in the near future. This is why we have set out on a private initiative to accomplish this task for the benefit not only of the archives of Mission 21, Basel Mission holdings, but

also of the people in the countries of origin of the music and of the newly founded Centre for African Studies of the University of Basel. This institution is striving to become a national centre of competence in research (NCCR). Our project provides the centre and the university with one more asset for the realisation of their ambitions.

The music on the records covers the full range of popular music in Ghana and Nigeria: palm wine trios, church bands and choirs, singing bands, guitar bands, brass bands, dance bands and praise singers. Most of this music can be called 'neo-traditional', making use of local and foreign instruments and creatively fusing local and foreign styles, melodies and rhythms into a new idiom.

The collection represents a significant part of the Ghanaian and Nigerian cultural heritage. This old time-music is hardly accessible in these countries today. Whereas in West Africa the records have been literally 'used up', they have not been distributed elsewhere. This latter fact makes the Basel collection particularly significant. Except for the archives of their manufacturer EMI in England which are closed to the public, nowhere will there be such a complete set of these records at a public institution.

The Basel Mission archives have an open archives policy and are an outstanding and much cherished resource for the study of Ghanaian history. They represent an important resource for the newly established Centre for African Studies at the University of Basel, to which the record collection is a valuable addition.

In order to make the collection accessible, the recordings have to be transferred to a different medium which is less fragile and can be handled easily. As our pilot project has shown, a digitisation and transfer to recordable compact disc (CD-R) is advisable. In a second step access world-wide shall be made possible through the internet. In combination with depositing copies of the above mentioned CD-Rs at key public archives in Ghana and Nigeria and with producing some commercial compilations on audio compact discs, this is the best way to provide for access in the countries of origin.

FINAL REPORT ON PILOT PROJECT

In order to create an awareness for this long-term project and to raise funds for it, a pilot project was realised in the course of the year 2001. It consisted of the digitisation of a selection of more than 100 titles from the collection and in the production of the commercial audio compact disc 'Ghana Popular Music 1931-1957'. The disc contains examples of all the different music styles from Southern Ghana featuring in the collection. It is accompanied by a booklet which provides the user with an introduction to the popular music of Ghana and with commented translations of the songs. The text is the product of a cooperation with the African Studies Centre of the University of Ghana, Legon. The disc was published under the renowned label Disques Arion at Paris and has been selling very well. It has further won the awards of the journals *Répertoire* and *Musiques traditionelles*.

In the course of this production an inventory of the collection (Excel-table) was established, which allows for easy control of and access to the records. It has provided us with a tool for checking with other archival institutions and with experts world-wide whether this music is already available at other places – which it is not. We were thus able to assess the importance of the collection and at the same time to check the condition of the records. Most of them have never been in use so far. There is no deterioration by fungus. As could be expected the Shellac has crackled, resulting in

the typical sound. This noise can be reduced considerably once the music has been digitised.

Producing the compact disc 'Ghana Popular Music 1931-1957' we have gained the necessary know-how about the digitalisation procedure and the costs involved. An important international network with institutions and specialists concerned with similar projects has been built up and has already proven very useful.

The project and disc were officially launched during the ABSA festival (Africa in Basel, Basel in Africa) which took place in August and September 2001 in Basel. A public presentation of the project and the disc in Ghana in collaboration with the Swiss embassy in Accra in January 2002 concluded the pilot project. Copies of the first set of digitised titles were handed over to selected archives in Ghana and a basis for future cooperation with specialists in the country has been established. The project was warmly welcomed in Ghana and was commended by the national commissioner on culture. Further copies of the digitised titles have been deposited with the Basel Mission archives and the Swiss national sound archives (Fonoteca Svizzera).

PROPOSED CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

As we have stated in the introduction our goal is to digitise the whole of the collection in order to make it accessible to the interested public in general and to allow for a transfer to the countries of origin. We propose a threefold approach:

1. Transcribing the music on several sets of c.37 CD-Rs accompanied by an electronic database. One set is to be kept as a deposit by the Swiss national sound archives (Fonoteca Svizzera). The Basel Mission Archives will receive two sets (one set is a security copy and one set is for the use by visitors to the archives). Ten sets will be placed at the archives of relevant institutions in Ghana and Nigeria. However, these copies are only for educational and documentary purposes, as for legal reasons they may not be played on the radio for instance. The originals will be placed in special sleeves and acid-free card board boxes.
2. Producing two commercial compact discs/cassettes for the international market (one on the Ghana section and one on the Nigeria section of the collection). This is important in order to publicise the project and its achievements and to make at least part of the music available to a wider public through the various radio stations in Ghana and Nigeria (see section 1 above). As our pilot project has shown, these commercial publications can be an excellent tool for public relations. Among those who have widely made use of it were WELINVEST, Nestlé Ghana, the embassy of Switzerland in Ghana, the Swiss Tropical Institute in Basel.
3. Establishing a website on which the whole of the collection can be searched and where the recordings can be downloaded individually. This is definitely the best way to reach people all over the world and is the line to follow up. However, it does not substitute the production of the sets of hard copies mentioned under section (1). The date for the full implementation of the website is recommended for the year 2008. By then the mechanical rights on the recordings held by EMI will have expired. Prior to this a pilot version with the 252 titles recorded between 1931 and 1939 might be uploaded.

STATE OF THE PROJECT

Currently we are looking for sponsors to support this project, which we hope to continue by summer 2003. A full length proposal including a budget and additional information is available from Veit Arlt.

Meanwhile we have also been organising a series of events, which are to promote our project and to cater for a public interested in African music and world music in general. These include the program "WEST AFRICAN POP ROOTS" which took place at Basel (and Zürich, Luzern and Fribourg) in December 2002.

It featured lectures, workshops, concerts and a scientific symposium and was based on a cooperation with the Musikakademie Basel, the Centre for African Studies of the University of Basel, mission21, the bird's eye jazz club and the Swiss Ethnomusicological Society. It was the result of a joint venture with the organisation Scientific African e.V. of Dr. Henrik Bettermann of the University of Witten Herdecke. Scientific African is an open archives project and has become an important partner of ours. For more information see www.scientific-african.org.

Further we have been a partner to the Basel Museum of Cultures on the occasion of the Museumsnacht which took place on the 17th of January 2003. The museum's theme for the event was "African Night" and it featured at its core the reconstruction of a Ghanaian music club of the early independence years, complete with live music, a bar and historical photographs in live size. You will find more informations on this event on our website under [Museumsnacht](#).

For further information please visit our websites:

www.scientific-african.de/ghanahighlife

www.scientific-african.de/workshop02

If you wish to support our project financially:

PC 40-542257-0

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