



Deutsche Botschaft
Accra

German Embassy
Accra

German-Ghanaian Relations through Music - Building Bridges for Mutual Understanding



The author and his formation Adikanfo performing at a cultural festival in Schwabach, Germany. (Photo: Moving Cultures)

Text: Mark K. Asamoah

I thank God the Almighty for giving me the strength and courage to live what I did not dream of: being a musician, teacher, entertainer, and lecturer. For in my early days in Ghana, percussionists and other musicians were the last to be regarded. “Oh, he is just a drummer!” – I heard this and similar comments in those days more than just once.

Fifty years of Independence allow us to proclaim, “We, the people of Ghana, no longer have to walk in darkness!” There is no cause to hide our faces in shame. When our eyes meet, they can gaze at one another with understanding and honesty. Those who fought for our Independence have kindled a torch within us and motivated us to walk on our paths with courage and deep desire for freedom. The light within us shows where we can place our feet in safety and in certainty; we are on sure ground. As Ghana is now on its feet, the time has come for all of us – at home and abroad – to contribute spiritually and financially to maintain the stability for our children. While we are proudly celebrating 50 years of German-Ghanaian cultural relations in 2007, we should therefore not forget that there is still more work to be done for us and for coming generations.

My journey from Asuom to Berlin

I was born at Asuom in the Eastern Region of Ghana; I grew up in a Christian family and started music in the church of my grandmother. Life-changing moments came when I travelled through Monrovia in Liberia and performed with the Supreme Action Singers in the late 1970s. I then went to England and to Berlin to continue my musical life. Today I live with my family in Berlin-Zehlendorf.

In the beginning of the 1980s I gradually got involved in working towards integration and mutual respect for cultural and ethnic diversity. Together with five Rock musicians from Berlin-Kreuzberg, I was part of an Afro Rock music group called *Bibiba*. Our lyrics were politically motivated and focused on police brutality and on the Apartheid regime of then South Africa. By the end of 1988 I formed a group called *Izwelethu* together with South African artists, singing freedom songs against the Apartheid regime. We were invited to take part in the renaming of a school in Berlin-Kreuzberg after Hector Peterson, the first black boy who was shot dead by South African police during the 1976 Soweto uprising. This project inspired me to continue working with school children. In order to combat prejudice, build mutual and moral trust in these children, I decided to concentrate on the youth.

Music against racism: a breakthrough experience

In 1989 I began teaching the musical heritage of Africa in German schools. It was a modest beginning, but over the years I supplemented my teachings with illustrative material and pictures of daily life and musical performances in Africa. I was never afraid of visiting schools and colleges where the rate of prejudice was high.

Some time after the German unification I was invited to a school in Storkow, a town in the eastern part of Germany. On my arrival, I heard some students shouting, “*Nigger raus!*” (Nigger, go away!). Only two students attended the class. The rest of them were hanging around but watching from a safe distance. All of a sudden, they started pouring in, and 20 minutes later the entire place was completely packed with people. At the end of the day, the lesson was moved to the main auditorium where almost the whole school joined us. Since the authorities were not sure of the outcome of all this, they invited plain clothed policemen to guard the school.

This experience encouraged me to proceed with the attempt to curb racism and right-wing extremism. I organised drumming workshops and concerts in Berlin and in the New Federal States of Eastern Germany. I even accepted an invitation to take part in a project with about 400 extremist-minded youths near Rostock. In the course of this project I found out that the vast majority of them are easily misled. Since then, I have encouraged many Africans to join such programmes in schools. I believe that this is the only way to co-operate with one another, to learn to love, and make friends.

***Ketewa*- Great things have little beginnings**

In 1994 the Pädagogisches Museum (Education Museum) in Berlin organised a children’s project focused on everyday life and the way children live in Africa. In the course of the project some children fell in love with Africa and continued to take percussion lessons from me. In 1995 this intercultural engagement started under the name *ketewa* (Great things have little beginnings) with children from age three to seven presenting unique African music. All of them are now teenagers, but they developed their own unmistakable original style and are still working together on African drumming.

Their musical achievements have allowed them to perform on various youth platforms. The young musicians are Africans and Germans living in Berlin; four young women, three young men, and the Duo Kofi Asamoah & Norbert Mattes. They have since produced two music CDs: *Kyekyekule* (2001) and *Adepa* (2005).



The author at a live demonstration of African drums at a kindergarten (Photo: Schmalz)

In the early 1990s I collaborated with African musicians from Senegal, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, and we formed a new Group: *Africa Mma* (African children). Our aim was to demonstrate to the German audience that the musicians from different parts of Africa have many things in common. *Africa Mma* won a World Music award in Plauen and a prize at “Musica Vitale” in Berlin in 1995.

Adikanfo (The Ancestors) is my latest musical group. Like in the case of similar ensembles in Ghana, its repertoire includes traditional rhythms, melodies, dances, and music instruments from all parts of the country. The increasing popularity of *Adikanfo* has helped to mediate an important aspect of Ghanaian culture to audiences in the heart of Europe. *Adikanfo* won the fifth music prize at the culture competition “Dr. Thoma Prize” in Berlin in 2002.

More African music on air, please!

Fifty years have passed but African musicians are still waiting to improve their lives and enjoy the benefit of their music. I think African Governments need to do more to support and to promote African arts here in Europe. There are so many talents in Africa which should be developed and treasured.

The German-Ghanaian cultural exchange has yielded some important results, especially in connection with large international events such as the World Exposition EXPO 2000 in Hanover or during the recent World Cup 2006. I am glad that many young people aged 16 to 24 have chosen as a result to do internships in various parts of Africa.

The interest of the German people in African films has been growing considerably. The annual Berlinale Film Festival has been inviting African film directors and artists, and great achievements have been made. In 2005 the Golden Bear – Germany's equivalent to Hollywood's Oscar – was awarded to the South African actor Pauline Malefane for her role in "u-Carmen e-Khayelitsha".

In music, however, our achievements in Germany are still behind those obtained in other European countries like France or England. As an African musician, I have acknowledged that there is not enough musical exposure. Labels that have made African musical showcase their main objective – which are, however, not the major music industries like Sony, Universal Records, and others – have categorised music like Salsa, Reggae, etc., as evidence that African music is, in fact, World Music. However, the perception of African music must be changed. Instead of classifying African music as exotic or entertaining, it must be promoted to change the hearts and minds of the people.

To create African radio and TV stations in Germany could help a lot. The more people hear and see us on TV, the more they develop interest in our music. I appeal to the major TV stations to let us enjoy a little bit of our culture. Also, more jobs could be given to African DJs to enable us to listen to our music on air.

Use our positivism to help children

I believe that African musicians who perform in an intercultural context have an important role to play for the better understanding of people. This is the reason why I am teaching and interacting with the Germans. Germany has opened doors for people of the world to live side by side and to portray their culture for their children to learn from one another. The financial support of such school programmes by the German Government has allowed for the youth of today to get in touch with Africa and to open a new page for African music and culture to be practised in German schools.

Many German school teachers have been travelling to different parts of Africa, taking drumming lessons to enable them to teach their students back home. Since I have been teaching, I have noticed that most of the German schools now have included African drums as part of their musical education. Many traditional African songs like *Kyeyekule*, *Tatale*, *Hakuna Matata*, *Ayelevi*, etc., are now being played in German schools.

This also benefits the children of African origin. Experiencing frustration due to the uncertainty of a future life, some of them tend to become rebellious and let out their feelings on their well-meaning parents. Too often the applications of these children to train for a trade of their inclination are rejected as competition of people of any race and background is getting tougher. As generations of African people had been hindered in the development of self-confidence, it is not surprising that today's children of African origin are lacking solidity to stand up and tackle adversities in the elbow job market. As they lose more and more interest in using their learning abilities, their relationship with their parents and teachers becomes more uncomfortable and less inclined to install self-respect in the children. It is a vicious circle, hard to break out of for any of the participants at this time in history.

African children rarely gain admission to the Gymnasium (Secondary School) in Germany. The number of these children willing to study hard and qualify is declining. The frustrating insecurity of this situation leads to depression and or violence. Due to my long time experience in schools,

teachers often call me to smooth out troubles. We should use all our power and positivism for helping the children and securing our place in the global society of today.

There are many ways to get involved

Apart from music, African representatives in Germany have many ways to become ambassadors of their culture and contribute to the social and political peace within their communities. Here in Berlin, for example, African representatives are being involved in the training of police officers, social welfare officials, and other governmental agencies. The programme is to build bridges and learn to understand the hearts and minds of Africans in Berlin.

The resonance of this project has met the approval of most African and police representatives, and is a step forward to develop understanding and co-operation. Expansion of such cultural dialogue across the borders of Africa and Germany respectively may be a turning point for the future generations. If these representative groups develop a shared understanding in early stages, they are much more likely to be accepted, and it is more likely to meet their needs.

Golden Jubilee must serve as turning point

I think the celebration of the Golden Jubilee must serve as a positive turning point in the nation's history. This is an excellent opportunity for Ghanaians to discuss and raise awareness of what Ghanaians living in Germany can do to support Ghana's development and the issues that it faces today. I am honoured to be part of this event and hope that it will help in connecting all Ghanaians living in Germany and elsewhere to contribute their quota to Ghana's development. Long live Africa, long live Ghana, and long live Germany.



Instead of classifying African music as exotic, our music must be promoted to change the hearts and minds of the people." (Photo: Klose)



- ["I will always remain a spider" - The Relevance of African Myths for European Children](#)
- [The "Black Pearl" on German Tennis Courts - Ghanaian-German Partnership in Tennis](#)
- [German-Ghanaian Relations through Music - Building Bridges for Mutual Understanding](#)
- [Promoting German-Ghanaian Tourism - Experiences of a Travel Guidebook Author](#)
- [The Lake Bosumtwi Project - Binational Co-operation in Scientific Research](#)
- [Religion and Medicine in Ghana - Between Tradition and Modernity](#)
- [Accra-Hanover, Roundtrip - Bringing a Cardiothoracic Centre to Ghana](#)
- [North-South Co-operation in Medicine - Capacity Building through Collaborative Research](#)
- [Chiefs, Migrants, and Educated Elite - 20 Years of Research in Northern Ghana](#)
- [50 years of Ghana National Football - The German Connection](#)
- [Ghana and Goethe - Confessions of an Addict](#)
- [Transboundary Management of Natural Resources - The Example of Volta Basin](#)