



## **Anti-Suicide Themes in Popular Ghanaian Music: A Focus on Nacee's *Yewo Nyame A Yewo Adze***



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### **Abstract**

The current article presents the results of a content analysis of a popular Ghanaian gospel song with anti-suicide themes and lyrics that have great potential to prevent suicidal behavior among listeners. The analysis was conducted against a backdrop of public intimations that suicide rates in the country were rising. The results of the analysis show that several lines in the lyrical text implore the listener to resist suicide while offering messages of patience, hope and encouragement, that can serve as preventative to suicide. It is impossible to quantify the full impact of the song on listeners and there is no way of knowing how many suicides have been prevented by the lyrical text of the song and the accompanying video presentation of events captured in the video. That the song has had a powerful impact on people who listen to it is evident in the listener's/viewers' comments left at the site of the song/video. The final segment of the article provides excerpts from some individuals' experiences with the song. The message of hope in the song, that things will get better has had a major effect on people. In the absence of official suicide prevention programs and policies, songs such as this are filling the void.

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## 1 Introduction

Ethnomusicologists and ethnologists are unanimous in their assertion that music is a cultural universal, and that it plays a vital role in all human societies (Haviland, 1999). In many societies across the globe, music serves as a major conduit for the transmission of values, beliefs, and norms. Frequently, song lyrics serve as a lens through which one can understand the social, political, and economic events occurring in society. A burgeoning body of literature also suggests that songs have the potential to affect the behaviors of listeners in society, including promoting aggressive “thoughts and feelings” (Anderson et al., 2003). In some cases, song lyrics and rhythms have impacted the behaviors of individuals and groups, positively or negatively, including suicidality and self-harm. Some research suggests that various musical genres such as rock, pop, country, blues, punk, and heavy metal, can influence suicidal ideation and behavior (Alves et al., 2022; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2021; Stack & Gundlach, 1992). To illustrate, the findings from Stack & Gundlach’s (1992), “multiple regression analysis of 49 metropolitan areas [in the United States] showed that the greater the airtime devoted to country music, the greater the white suicide rate” (p.211).

In April 2017, American East Coast rapper, DJ Logic, released an anti-suicide or suicide prevention song titled “1-800-273-8255,” the actual phone number of the American National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL). This hotline provides free and confidential, 24-hour, multi-language support for people in anguish or distress. The song text promoted a story of hope and recovery and anguish. A study conducted by Niederkrotenthaler and associates (2021) found that the song contributed to a 5.5% reduction in suicide mortality in the United States during a small period of time that the song received intense media coverage. The volume of calls to the national suicide prevention lifeline increased manifold, resulting in the curtailment of both suicides and attempted suicides.

Followers of the Ghanaian musical scene will concur that there exists a long history of the use of music as a vehicle for the purveyance of pertinent information to the entire populace or segments of society (Adinkrah, 2008; Brempong, 1996). Music’s popularity as a conduit for the transmission of germane societal information and influence stems, largely from the relatively low literacy rate in the society and ready availability and access to radio and television. According to statistics provided by Statistica, “in 2018, the average ownership rate of radios was at 57.2 percent among the surveyed households in Ghana. The highest concentration of radios within households was reported in the Eastern region, at 65.3 percent, while the lowest concentration was reported in the Northern region, at 45.9”.

Several societies around the world with high or increasing rates of suicide lack official suicide prevention programs and policies. Indeed, most of the countries that have official suicide prevention programs are located in high-income Western industrialized countries (Hendin, 2009). Ghana is one such country that lacks official government programs and policies to prevent and reduce suicide. Absent this important resource, many suicide prevention stakeholders in the country do resort to non-governmental approaches such as music, film, plays, and dramatizations to convey anti-suicide messages to designated groups. To date, no research attention has been paid to music’s usage or potential utility for suicide prevention efforts in Ghana. Yet, it is widely noted that some suicides are caused by stress, anxiety, depression, and despair and that music can become a medium for spreading messages of hope and for relieving stress, anxiety, and depression (Jacoby et al., 2019; Trehub et al., 1993; Perlovsky et al., 2013; Santika et al., 2019). In this context, popular music identified by the current author to contain a message of hope for the depressed and with anti-suicidal lyrical content is examined and profiled in this article. I review the lyrical text of the song and then discuss the song’s potential to prevent suicide and thereby, reduce suicide mortality and nonfatal suicidal behaviors in Ghana.

### *Ghanaian society*

Ghana is an ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and religiously pluralistic or heterogeneous society located along the western coastal region of Africa. The country’s current population of about 35 million people is divided along ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines. The substantial majority of Ghanaians, slightly more than 71%, are Christian. Eighteen percent are Muslim, 5% claim to be adherents and practitioners of traditional Ghanaian religion, mostly ancestor veneration and animism, and 6% belong to other religions or claim to have no religion at all. At present, there is a paucity of resources for the diagnosis and treatment of mental health ailments in the country. The few psychiatric hospitals are government owned, spatially located only in the urban landscape; in addition, they are severely underfunded, and overcrowded. At present, there is a shortage of every category of mental health personnel, including psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychiatric mental health nurses (Adinkrah, 2019). Currently in Ghana,

mental illness is commonly attributed to spiritual genesis such as malevolent witchcraft (Adinkrah, 2015), and sorcery and there is a huge stigma attached to sufferers and their families. Psychiatric patients are often abandoned by their families while undergoing treatment in psychiatric facilities and are often rejected during post-treatment release. People who attempt suicide are mocked in society for having preferred death over life.

### *Suicide and Anti-Suicide Laws in Ghana*

A person commits suicide when they take their own life. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), around the world, there are about one million completed suicides annually. In addition, it is estimated that there are 10 to 20 nonfatal suicidal acts for each lethal suicidal act. Suicidal ideations are much more rampant. Suicidal ideation is a term used to denote thoughts about, or a preoccupation or obsession with suicide (Gliatto & Rai, 1999; Sokero et al., 2003). Occasionally referred to as “suicidal thinking,” the variety of behaviors deemed suicidal ideation varies enormously, ranging from fleeting or momentary thoughts about suicide to comprehensive or scrupulous planning, role-playing, self-harm and abortive attempts of suicide, which may be deliberately designed to fail or be noticed, or maybe fully intended to result in death. Although the bulk of suicide ideators do not attempt to commit suicide, a large percentage of such persons do. Suicidal ideation is more common than attempted suicide and completed suicide (Gliatto and Rai, 1999; Sokero et al., 2003). Extant research shows that suicidal ideation is generally associated with depression; however, suicide ideation is also connected with many other psychiatric disorders.

Suicide is considered a tragic social phenomenon in most societies, and many people are outraged by suicide mortality and morbidity. In Ghana, suicide is prohibited by each of the various ethnic cultures in the country. For example, Akans strongly condemn any act of self-destruction (Adinkrah, 2020, 2022). In precolonial Asante society, suicide was punished ruthlessly by the political authorities. The corpse of a person who died by suicide was legally adjudicated posthumously, invariably convicted of the crime of self-murder and additional offenses suspected to have triggered the suicide. Following the guilty verdict, the corpse was corporally punished by decapitation. At present, posthumous suicide corpse trials and attendant corpse desecration have stopped. Yet, the opprobrium surrounding suicide continues. In many Ghanaian communities, persons who die by suicide are given peremptory burials in special cemeteries designated for stigmatized deaths and are denied funerary rites (Adinkrah, 2015). Indeed, the country’s legal system proscribes attempted suicide. According to the Ghana Criminal Code (1960, Act 29), nonfatal suicidal behavior is a criminal offense. Section 57 of the Code stipulates that “whoever attempts to commit suicide shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.” Consequently, persons who engage in nonfatal suicidal behavior in Ghana are subject to criminal apprehension and prosecution, and on conviction, receive criminal penalties. Persons who make abortive attempts to end their lives are swiftly apprehended by police and arraigned before the courts. Almost invariably, they are convicted at trial and sentenced to custodial prison terms, with or without a financial penalty (Adinkrah, 2011, 2012, 2013).

In Ghana, in recent years, there has been intimation that suicidal behavior is on the rise. It is estimated that some 1,400 people take their own lives annually. Both scholarly and popular articles have reported modest to dramatic increases in the volume of suicidal ideation among segments of the population (Adinkrah, 2014), and suicidal deaths occurring in the country (Adinkrah, 2011, 2012). In addition, various print and electronic media news outlets also regularly report incidents of suicidal deaths. Findings from extant research indicate that most suicides are committed by men, young, and middle-aged persons and that the most common suicide methods are hanging and ingestion of poison. Also, persons who engage in nonfatal suicidal behavior are mostly male (Adinkrah, 2011, 2012). Furthermore, murder-suicide offenders are almost all men (Adinkrah, 2014). For Ghana, researchers have found suicide motives to include financial challenges and indebtedness, marital and romantic problems, as well as efforts to avoid social stigma and shame stemming from a variety of personal problems. Among young people, emotional distress and experiencing some type of loss are triggering factors (Adinkrah, 2011, 2012).

How to prevent and control suicidal behavior is an overriding concern of suicidologists. Consequently, in response to incidents of suicidal behavior in Ghana, local health authorities, including psychologists and psychiatrists have spoken about the urgency in the need to control suicidal behavior in society. Despite the influx of information on suicide mortality and morbidity and demands by stakeholders to identify means to reduce suicidal behavior in the country, the society currently lacks a national suicide prevention policy or program of suicide reduction. In addition, there is a severe shortage of psychologists, psychiatrists, and counseling personnel in the country, to provide effective counseling to suicidal persons and their families. There is also a paucity of published literature and self-help material for persons facing economic and interpersonal difficulties (Van der Geest, 2004; Harrison, 2020;

Jakubowski et al., 2022; Iswanto et al., 2018). To date, whatever efforts exist to curtail the incidence of suicidal behavior—suicide and attempted suicide—have been informal and have rested on individuals, non-governmental organizations, and other non-formal institutions. Without their awareness, several popular musicians have, through their music, been contributing to the abridgment of suicidal behavior in society through the lyrical texts of their songs. The current article considers a case in point, focusing on Nacee’s *Yewo Nyame A Yewo Adze* (“Yewo Nyame,” 2016). The article analyzes the lyrical text of the song and considers its potential role in contributing to the deterrence of suicide and suicidal behavior in Ghanaian society.

## 2 Materials and Methods

Information presented in the current article was derived from a content analysis of *Yewo Nyame A Yewo Adze*. The video of the song that is the focus of the current study was located on *Youtube.com*. The video was replayed numerous times in order to capture the entire lyrics. This was neatly typed up in a Microsoft Word file. The lyrical content of the song or song text was then analyzed for pertinent information regarding anti-suicide and suicide prevention themes. It must be noted that the author of the present article is an Akan native and speaks and writes Twi fluently. These skills facilitated the transcription, translation of the text into English, and analysis of the song text. At the time of this writing, the song has generated nearly 800 comments from commenters since it was posted on *Youtube.com* on August 23, 2016. These comments reveal a good deal about the experiences of individuals with the song. Some of the excerpts are provided in the final section of the article.

## 3 Results and Discussions

### *The Song: Yewo Nyame A Yewo Adze*

The song *Yewo Nyame A Yewo Adze* is by Nacee (or Nana Kweku Osei), and also features Ernest Opoku. The song is jointly performed by Nacee and Ernest Opoku—both highly successful gospel artists in Ghana who have garnered multiple national music awards. The video is 4 minutes and 52 seconds long and is one of the song’s featured on Nacee’s 9-track music album called *Counselor* (“Can Nacee Win VGMA Artiste of the Year,” 2016). Although a gospel track, there is very little reference to scripture or scriptural text in the song. The song is sung in Twi, the Akan lingua franca, spoken by about 85 percent of the Ghanaian population. The song is highly popular among the Ghanaian populace. Although no information exists regarding the number of albums or song recordings sold, evidence of the song’s popularity exists and can be gleaned from other sources. In 2016 when the album was released, it received extensive media coverage and was played repeatedly on various television and radio programs around the country. Since that time, the popularity of the song has not waned and it continues to be widely played at entertainment and religious programs and festivities around the country. Additionally, the song won the Vodafone Ghana Music Awards 2017 Best Album of the Year, a further indication of its appeal and popularity. On the *Youtube.com* website that features the song, there were 4,307,057 views, 762 listeners’ comments, and 11,000 “likes” as of January 29, 2023. The overwhelming majority of commenters were effusive in their praise of the artists and the lyrical contents of the song.

### *Anti-Suicide and Suicide Prevention Themes in Yewo Nyame A Yewo Adze*

The song begins with a reference to human life or the human soul as belonging to God. The listener is told plainly that their lives, coupled with their current living conditions, are neither their own nor of their own making, and that neither their current nor future lives are their own (*nkwa nnye wo dea, asetena yi nso nye wo dea*). Confronted with adversity, the listener is given a message of hope, that as long as they have life, prosperity is possible. This message is encapsulated in a common Akan saying *Se wo nwwu ye a, wo nnim nea wobunya* (if you are not deceased, you don’t know what you may gain). As the authors of one book on suicide characterize it, “living is more successful than dying” (Stark & Bainbridge, 1997).

The next stanza in the lyrical text of the song discourages the listener from committing suicide. The listener is instructed emphatically not to ever entertain the idea of committing suicide, even under the most stressful and

demanding of conditions: *enka wano aduro* (do not drink poison); *enkɔ hyɛ akɔmfɔ* (do not commit suicide by hanging); *nkɔdi wo ho awu* (do not cause your own death; do not commit self-murder). In a sense, the lyricists are aware of the dominant suicide methods in Ghana and implore the suicidal person not to utilize any of these means to abridge their lives.

Throughout the song, the listener is given the assurance to hope and envision that things will be well and that by placing their hope in God, all things are possible. This is followed by the following refrain: *Me wɔ Nyame a me wɔ adze* (if I have God, I have something magnificent) or *(Wo wɔ Nyame a wo wɔ adze* (if you have God, you have something worthwhile) which is repeated 36 times. This is incidentally the title of the song. When confronted with an adverse situation, whether currently or in the future, the listener is importuned to have patience (*si abotare*); with patience, all will be well eventually, and ultimately (*sɛ wo si abotare a Onyame behwe wo*) if you have patience, all will be well because God will take care of you. Be quiet (*wo de ye komm, wo de ye dinn*). If the listener is patient, God will take care of you, all will be well and soon you will be singing a celebratory song of success (*ayeyie ndwom*). Listeners are advised to place their hope in God and to put their trust in God (*gye Onyankopɔn di*).

A message about God's plan for human beings is prominent in the song. The listener is told that the individual's wishes are not God's wishes. The individual does not know what arrangements God has made for them. They must therefore be patient and trust in God and wait on the Lord. The message of having faith (*gyedi*) in God is also given prominence.

### *Song Video*

The *Youtube* video that is the focus of analysis for this article features a riveting dramatization that accompanies the powerful lyrics and alternating vocals of Nacee and Ernest Opoku. In the opening scenes of the video, a young, apparently successful man with a briefcase in hand is exiting his gated mansion and approaching a luxurious sedan vehicle, seemingly on his way to work. Suddenly, the young man falls from the vehicle onto the pavement, afflicted by a medical crisis. As bystanders immediately rush to his aid and convey him back to the entrance of his home, a visibly distraught woman—evidently the wife of the afflicted man—follows behind, demanding of those assisting her husband to tell her what had transpired, with the voices of those who assisted him trailing off as they explain his sudden collapse. The next scene fast forwards to an indeterminate period into the future and we find the young man sitting in a wheelchair in his living room watching television and reading a text that appears to be a Christian Bible.

Viewers then bear witness to the daily casual cruelties inflicted on the wheelchair-bound man by his wife. He struggles to rise above his circumstances only to find himself at the mercy of a heartless wife who physically, psychologically, and emotionally maltreats him in his helpless state. On one occasion, he struggles from his wheelchair to reach bottled water from the upper compartment of a refrigerator in the kitchen. With deliberate cruelty, the wife strolls into the kitchen, reaches past him to retrieve bottled water from the refrigerator and drinks it leisurely in front of him before brushing past him out of the kitchen without offering him a bottle. Then there are the more harrowing moments of more blatant abuse. On one occasion, she brutally dumps him out of his wheelchair as he approaches her seemingly for some type of assistance as she is seated on the couch in the living room. In another scene, she returns home with a friend with bags in hand after an apparent outing that included shopping. As she enters the living room, she responds with anger to find her husband sitting in his wheelchair in front of the television enjoying a program. She approaches him, slaps him across the face, snatches the remote control from his hand, then, once again, tosses him out of his wheelchair as he falls helplessly to the floor (Shafer & Silverman, 2013; Martin et al., 1993; Bain et al., 2016).

In the face of such horrific abuse from a wife who should have been caring for him, the young man displays fortitude, continuing to read his scriptural text while confined to his wheelchair. He does not succumb to suicide despite the drastic change in fortunes in his life—from a highly successful businessman to a helpless and abused wheelchair-bound young man. In the final scene of the video, he falls out of his wheelchair while in the process of trying to take his medication. There is a moment where he struggles repeatedly to rise up back into his wheelchair. Then, with the rousing vocals of Nacee and Ernest Opoku in the background, he rises to his feet and is able to stand completely upright without any support. He pushes his wheelchair away, pauses, and then breaks into a celebratory dance. His wife emerges from another room in the house and immediately gasps at the sight of the man, not only out of his wheelchair but dancing as Nacee and Ernest Opoku's voices continue in song. Then the woman slowly approaches her husband and genuflects in front of him in a plea for forgiveness. The couple embraces and the video ends with a biblical excerpt from Proverbs 20:22 which is projected onto the screen. The text states:

Do not say, "I will repay evil"  
 Wait for the Lord  
 And He will Deliver You

### *Viewers and Listeners' Comments*

In this section of the article, I shift focus to an examination of the song's impact on listeners. What is the effect of the music on suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior among listeners? Does the song have the power to suppress suicidal thoughts? At the individual level, has the song caused anyone with suicidal ideation to abandon plans to engage in suicidal behavior? As noted above, there were 762 listeners' and viewers' comments, as of January 29, 2023, that were reviewed and analyzed for their content. Based on this analysis, it can be conjectured that the video has had positive effects on several listeners and likely saved some lives by discouraging some from suicide. The song and the accompanying video drama have deep emotional effects on listeners and viewers. In the video, the optics of seeing a previously rich, successful man, now handicapped and bound to a wheelchair while facing both physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his wife is demoralizing but the viewer sees this man struggling to cope with adversity. Despite his physical disability and physical and psychological victimization, he is persistent in his reading of the scriptural text which he carries with him throughout the period of his struggles. When he falls out of his wheelchair, he is on the ground, struggling to get up unaided. But then he succeeds, rising to his feet and then giving a triumphant dance. The triumph of his overcoming a major physical handicap in the face of the persistent abuse from his wife is worth celebrating.

It is not known how many lives have been saved by this song. In the section below, I have presented ten of the comments verbatim.

- 1) When nothing seems to go right, when mum is no more, when my entire family seems stagnant. When every prayer seems unanswered. When it feels like God has forgotten us. All I need is a song like this to keep me alive.
- 2) The song is not only soothing by its sheer arrangement but also has powerfully inspiring lyrics [that] we all need to survive these hard times.
- 3) Very true if you have God, you have everything. Never give up, just put your trust in the Lord and He will surely deliver. A very powerful and inspiring song.
- 4) Nacee, you won an award for this song. It's not really about the award though, but about the lives you have touched through this song. God bless you.
- 5) When I feel [that] the world has come to an end and when I feel so down that there is no hope, this powerful song gives me so much hope that there is a mighty God.
- 6) I listen to this song every single morning and my hope [is] revamped and renewed before I start the day. The lyrical content is powerful and touching. The song touches my soul...I recommend this song to everyone.
- 7) [I]am still listening to this great song in 2019. It was like the world had come to an end for me. I was just feeling like ending my life, but this song gave me hope and with the help of my pastor, family, and my boyfriend soon to be my husband I overcame it. I am a happy person in 2020 till now and I pray for more. God, I am grateful for how far you brought me, and I will be forever grateful.
- 8) I was always in tears and sorrow. I had nobody to look up to. One Sunday morning when preparing for church, a friend of mine sent me this special song. After listening to it, I felt something special within me. Since then, my life has changed completely. If you have God, you have everything. Thanks for this special song.
- 9) I love this song. I almost gave up in life but after listening to this song, I know my Redeemer lives.
- 10) Anytime that I am sad, I just go by this song. It has been my life because sometimes I just feel to kill myself because I was in pain, sad always, but now I own myself. Thank God.

As several comments suggest, listeners of the song may conceivably be less apt to engage in suicidal behavior. For example, comments #7, #9 and #10 in particular, indicate that they refrained from committing suicide as a result of the song's impact. For some, it relieved the pressures associated with daily living. For many, the song served as a powerful source of comfort in the face of adversity and suffering. For some, the song forced them to acknowledge God as a dependable resource that will rescue them from their current and future problems. There is only one direct reference to Jesus on the cross in the song text. Given the absence of explicit, specific scriptural texts, the message

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from the song text and the accompanying visuals would resonate with and benefit persons regardless of religious affiliation.

#### 4 Conclusion

This article has reviewed the video and the lyrical text of a popular gospel song in Ghana with a message of hope in the face of adversity. The analysis suggests that the song has the potential to curtail suicidal ideation and prevent suicidal behavior among listeners. People experiencing depression and despair can be aided by the optimistic message and be discouraged from committing suicide. The song counsels listeners not to kill themselves when faced with problems in life and to trust in God that things will get better. *Me Wo Nyame a Me Wo Adze*/If I have God, I have something worthy. In conclusion, music has tremendous potential to serve as a suicide prevention tool, in the absence of official programs and policies. It is envisaged that the study will lead to more research on music's role in impacting suicide and as a tool in suicide prevention. In the absence of financial resources to implement suicide prevention programs, African governments must utilize their readily available and culturally relevant resources to treat, manage, and prevent suicides to help reduce the number of suicides on the continent.

##### *Conflict of interest statement*

The author declared that he has no competing interests.

##### *Statement of authorship*

The author has a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author has approved the final article.

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