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Ghanaian Spoken-word Poet Yom Nfojoh's Record
*Alter Native***

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'Dotokpo' and Soak Up the Ancestral Logic in the Ghanaian Spoken-word Poet Yom Nfojoh's Record *Alter Native*

Sela Kodjo Adjei

This critical essay offers deep insights into the Ghanaian performance-poet and writer Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*. Yom shares allegories, autobiographical accounts, confessions, and critical self-reflections aimed at attaining personal freedom, self-decolonization, and self-reformation. For Yom, the radical decision to publicly share his personal struggles and issues of national concern through music, storytelling, and spoken-word poetry served as a liberating force that freed his mind from the colonial aftershock, the burden of personal guilt, and the Eurocentric education affecting contemporary African societies. As a result, both critical self-reflection and a scathing assessment of neocolonial problems serve him as a rebellious path to self-discovery, self-care, healing, and mental emancipation. By means of textual analysis and a systematic reading of Yom's spoken

word poems, I deconstruct key verses and stanzas in his poems to reveal decolonial praxis, self-disclosure, and coded messages. Wielding his oratory skills as poetic license to freely 'speak his mind,' Yom also confesses the 'sins' and 'ills' of political elites to publicly reveal the post-colonial plight of Africans in contemporary times. Yom's self-disclosure and self-decolonization processes operate as what Foucault diagnosed as 'beasts of confession.' Through this transformative creative process of sublimation, Yom employs spoken word poetry to achieve agency and to reassert personal power for self-reformation and positive national consciousness. Broadening the discussion, this essay incorporates my personal perspectives as an artist who likewise pursues decolonial aesthetics by highlighting my engagement with Anlo-Ewe Vodun art in relation to my artistic research and practice.

Keywords: African, autobiography, catharsis, confession, decolonization, Ewe, Ghana, music, post-colonial, spoken-word poetry

Yom Nfojoh's Poetic Journey to Self-Reflection and Re-education

Yom Nfojoh is a celebrated Ghanaian performance-poet and writer from the Volta Region of Ghana. Prior to the release of his EP *Alter Native* in 2022, Yom's creative journey revolved around live shows and selected performances in Accra. Over the years, his approach to spoken word poetry has evolved, based on feedback from his audience. Yom's passion for music also motivated him to employ varied instrumentation to complement his poems. Before reading further, I highly recommend immersing yourself in Yom's EP *Alter Native*, which is accessible on most music streaming platforms.

Yom's storytelling on the EP spans a broad range of social issues.

Some are rooted in tradition, such as 'Sakawa' and its ethical complexities reminiscent of traditional West African trickster tales. The poem 'Somebody' serves as a critique of societal divisions, prejudice, envy and ethnic rivalries that hinder progress and unity. 'Dotokpo' draws on ancestral wisdom, and 'Paa Joe' is a moral self-inquiry inspired by Yom's personal experiences.

Yom's artistic evolution as captured in his record reflects a contemporary response to the historical context of African colonialism and its enduring effects. His journey from performing live shows in Accra to the creation of this EP goes hand-in-hand with a deeper exploration of themes central to contemporary experiences in Ghana. The record's vivid portrayal of personal and communal narratives echoes the broader historical experiences of colonialism, exploitation, and miseducation that have shaped the African continent for the past centuries. This connection between Yom's personal artistic evolution and the wider historical context sets the stage for understanding the significance of his work in the ongoing discourse of post-colonial African identity and cultural revival. His work is important because it challenges the colonial aftershock and empowers individuals and communities to reflect on social issues to reclaim their identities and self-determination.

I personally find Yom's work compelling because his personal journey is intertwined with my own artistic research and spiritual journey. My work also highlights the importance of questioning colonial education by means of critical self-inquiry and a pursuit of knowledge from within one's own cultural milieu. As an artist and a lecturer at the University of Media, Arts and Communication in Accra, Ghana, my work sits at the intersection of studio practice and pedagogy. This dual passion informs everything I do, leading me to explore the relationship between art, colonial history, philosophy, education, and studio practices.

In the past decade, I have embarked on a conscious journey to re-center indigenous knowledge, using it as a philosophical framework for my artistic expression and pedagogy. My approach seeks theoretical frameworks that resonate with the lived realities of African scholars and students. When I engage in research or share my findings, a primary concern is the question of how we discuss artistic research within the African context. My aim is to prevent the repetition of mistakes made by early Eurocentric writers, whose inaccurate ethnographic publications continue to influence some African scholars today. I firmly believe that African theorists and knowledge systems should take precedence over Western epistemological frameworks.

This 'theorizing from within' approach is driven by my own educational experience. As an artist, I recognize the profound deficiencies of an education system that is still largely rooted within a colonial educational framework. Contemporaries schooled through similar colonial educational systems, Yom and I both prioritize preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, especially in the face of globalization and 'Western' hegemony. Through African-centered books, continuous self-education,

and mentorship from esteemed African scholars, I strive to unlearn and challenge the colonial education I received. This ongoing process fuels my artistic and academic pursuits, propelling me to advocate for knowledge systems that more justly reflect the African experience. In essence, like Yom, I am also an artist, a researcher, and a passionate advocate for decolonizing artistic narratives and research methodologies. This educational journey is one of constant learning, unlearning, and relearning, guided by African epistemologies.

Return of the 'Cathedral': Navigating Cultural Identity and the Colonial Aftershock through Ghanaian Poetry

Many African countries have a long history of colonialism, exploitation, and miseducation. These issues continue to adversely impact African communities today. The contemporary art world has traditionally been dominated by Western methodologies and art theories, which has led to a Eurocentric bias and marginalized the contributions of African artists and poets. With the enduring social problems that colonialism has caused in African societies, artists and poets play a vital role in challenging the Eurocentric bias in the art world and promoting self-decolonization through their creative expressions. They use their work to explore and celebrate African culture and heritage, to critique the colonial aftershock, and to envision a dignified and equitable future.

The early generation of Ghanaian poets, including Raphael Armattoe, Efa Sutherland, Abena Busia, Kofi Anyidoho, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor, and Attukwei Okai, played a vital role in challenging colonial stereotypes which denigrated African cultural values while promoting nationalism and self-decolonization through their work. They greatly relied on Ghanaian oratory skills and rhetoric to write compelling poems which reappraised and celebrated Ghanaian cultural values and heritage.

For instance, Kofi Awoonor's poem 'The Cathedral' (1964) served as a thought-provoking exploration of Africa's encounter with colonial disruption: a clash between traditional African spirituality and Western influences. The poem employs vivid imagery and symbolism to depict a cathedral, a symbol of Christian religion, looming over the landscape of African culture. Awoonor skillfully portrays the cathedral as an overbearing colonial presence, casting a grotesque shadow over the natural surroundings, indigenous beliefs, and spiritual practices of Ghanaian people, who are deeply connected to ancestral veneration. The contrast between the 'hegemonic walls' of the cathedral and the 'sacred grove' of the ancestors highlights the tension between these two conflicting worlds.

Today, five decades after his poem was written, it comes as no surprise that witty social critics in contemporary Ghana invoked Awoonor's 'huge senseless cathedral of doom' in response to the ruling NPP government's scandalous and inflation-ridden 'investment' in building a 'National Cathedral.' This interdenominational Christian church

was supposed to be inaugurated in Accra in 2018—however, this never happened, and the cathedral still does not exist. The building was intended as a pledge, physically manifested by Ghana's current president Akufo-Addo, to pay testament to the 'grace and victory' God served to his ruling party, the NPP, in the 2016 Ghanaian national elections. The controversial \$400 million state-funded church (whose budget ballooned from an original estimate of \$100 million) gradually came to elicit the resentment of most Ghanaians, leading to scathing criticism against the ruling NPP government.

Thus, several decades after Awoonor's 'Cathedral' was written, it still conveys a sharp critique of corruption while drawing attention to how cultural values are being eroded by neo-colonial influences. Ultimately, 'The Cathedral' invites readers to reflect on the socio-cultural transformations brought about by colonialism and the lingering presence of ancestral beliefs, cultural values, and spiritual practices in contemporary Ghanaian societies.

Prior to Awoonor's rise as a celebrated Ghanaian poet, Raphael Armattoe (1913–53), an astute poet, scientist, and Ewe nationalist, had similarly challenged the double standards of Christian teachings and the problems they posed to Africans deeply connected to Vodun. Vodun is a spiritual practice and knowledge system from West Africa fundamentally rooted in the reverence and veneration of ancestors. For Armattoe, going back to his African spiritual roots was a practical step to reassert his cultural identity:

-
'Tell them I'll go no more
To their village school
I go back to my own,
The Clay idol and the Legba
The Se and Bokonon
I go back to the Asperges
Of Afla and the slaughtered fowl'
(Armattoe 1954: 55).

Beyond the Creative Influences that Shaped Yom's EP *Alter Native*

Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native* finds resonance with the legacy of influential Ghanaian poets such as Awoonor and Armattoe, and with the broader movement for decolonization and cultural revival. Like them, Yom uses poetry and music as tools to challenge colonial narratives and reassert African cultural values. Yom's work is often quite critical of colonialism and neo-colonial problems in Ghanaian societies, which challenges his listeners to critically reflect on the world around them.

Moreover, this EP goes beyond earlier African poets and nationalists in exploring the possibilities of self-decolonization through

artistic expression. His lyrics are introspective, often exploring complex themes with sophistication and nuance. This is one of the main reasons why I find Yom's work important. By reclaiming our own personal narratives, we are positioned as artists to explore pertinent social issues in ways which are truly meaningful and relevant to our social experiences. It also embodies a collective approach to decolonial creative work that is meditated on, composed, recorded, and performed in community.

Yom's Pan-African influences are particularly evident in his rare mix of styles and sounds. Yom's music is deeply engaged with the works of a wide range of other musicians, artists, and Pan-African poets. A careful listener can discern influences from accomplished poets like Kofi Anyidoho, Kofi Awoonor, Jamaican dub-poet Kwesi Linton Johnson, and musical icons like Gyedu Blay Ambolley, Amandzeba, A. B. Crentsil, and Saka Acquaye. The rhythms and style adopted in Yom's record can be linked to musical groups like Hedzole and Osibisa.⁵ Other influences can be traced to Agbadza rhythms, jazz, Atongo Zimba, the afrobeat king Fela Kuti, the legendary percussionist Nii Adjiri Williams (aka Shikome), the Togolese singer Afia Mala, Ivorian singer Dobet Gnahoré, and diaspora artistes like Akua Naru, De La Soul, India Arie, Teddy Pendegrass, Gil Scot-Heron, Nasir Jones, and Jamaican reggae icon Barrington Levy.

Ever since Yom released his single 'Serwaa Akoto' (featuring TarandBella), I have been following his creative journey keenly. I was privileged enough to receive a copy of *Alter Native* to critically review it ahead of the release. As university mates at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (2005–2009), our paths crossed because Yom and I shared a number of mutual friends. During our final year, we regularly had 'sittings' in the forecourts of Evandy Hostel (in Bomso, Kumasi) where we discussed philosophical matters deep into the night while musing about life after graduating from university.

On 11 March 2022, an intimate crowd of privately invited guests gathered at the Hush Lounge in Accra's Labone Coffee Shop to support the release of Yom's debut EP, *Alter Native*. Among these invited guests were poets like Paul God, Poetra Asantewaa, and Elikplim Akorli; rappers like Kwadjo Spiri; filmmaker Fofo Gavua; and Yom's childhood friends from the early 1990s. Apart from the rhythmic percussion, the lyrics of the songs make the EP clearly stand out as a well-crafted anthology of poetry. Poetra Asantewaa, an acclaimed poet, shared this view in personal conversation with me:

'The *Alter Native* EP is a fusion of spoken word poetry with multi-genre production and composition, in a way that has made it distinctly different by placing it at the intersections of a range of influences' (Asantewaa 2022, personal communication).⁶

Two Spanish students who were both conducting their master's research on contemporary Ghanaian music also joined the release party. Their separate feedback summarizes Yom's eclectic style:

'Very emotive way of bringing different kinds of music and artists into his poetry. The passion and work put on his verses showed how deeply connected he is to the issues and topics present in his poems. His poetry is adventurous, emotional, strong, soft and fun all at the same time. We especially loved the poem about how beautiful and powerful the African woman is. We are excited to listen to his EP again!!' (Anonymous 2022, personal communication).⁷



Figure 1. Selected audience listening to *Alter Native* EP, 2022. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.



Figure 2. A portrait of Yom The Poet. © Yom Nfojoh, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Alter Native features artists like Feli Nuna, ZBudda, Verony, Villy, and Yom's father Captain Nfojoh, who served in Ghana's PNDC regime⁸ after the 1979 military junta led by J. J. Rawlings. Vocal artists such as Villy from Nigeria and Zibudda from Ivory Coast/Togo were especially featured to expand the musical horizon and cultural diversity of the record and to brand it as a true West African project. The album was recorded live with the Senku Live Band, which is based in Accra. Jayso, one of Ghana's most prolific sound engineers, mixed and mastered the EP.

The cultural diversity expressed in this record projects Yom's linguistic prowess above his contemporaries. A master wordsmith, Yom presents his audience with Ga, Twi, Ewe and Pidjin expressions. Yom's multi-lingual flow reflects the cosmopolitan nature of Ghanaian settlements, particularly the cities Ho, Obuasi, Kumasi, and suburbs of Accra⁹ that shaped Yom's creative spirit and upbringing. As the son of a former Ghanaian diplomat from the revolutionary PNDC regime, Yom has personally been exposed to various cultures, languages, and ethnic groups in Ghana. The social context of Yom's

poems is significant because it roots his work in the lived experiences and cultural realities of contemporary African societies, particularly Ghana. By incorporating issues of national concern into his poetry, Yom lends authenticity to his artistic expressions and elevates the relevance of his themes—ranging from gender dynamics to socioeconomic challenges. This contextual grounding allows readers and listeners to engage more deeply with the issues at hand, fostering a connection that transcends the aesthetic. Moreover, it positions his poetry as a powerful medium for social commentary and change, offering perspectives that challenge prevailing norms and encourage critical reflection on societal values and practices.



Figure 3. Captain Nfojoh at the *Alter Native* EP release. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Cultural Awakening, Self-Decolonization, and Critical Self-Reflection One Verse at a Time

The album chronicles Yom's transformation from his previous self to embrace a true representation of his African identity on multiple fronts. He takes great inspiration from his Ewe roots and the ancient customs and traditions hardwired into the African psyche. Commenting on the EP, Yom states that:

'Alter Native is my attempt to communicate on all fronts, to present a modern African art form which encompasses all the tools, experiences and influences available to us... [The album] employs an array of musical genres both traditional and foreign to make for the creation of a masterful blend' (Nfojoh 2022).



Figure 4. Yom the Poet.
© Yom Nfojoh, all rights reserved, used with permission.

The album's title reads as 'alternative,' as in 'alternative music': popularly known as 'Alté,' this sub-genre of underground urban West African music is produced by performers who are eclectic and outside the mainstream. Yet, Yom cannot be pigeonholed into a single genre or subculture. *Alter Native* takes you on a Griots sankofa journey through life, language, history, culture, and tradition.

Yom's poems serve as a powerful entry point into his imaginative world. The narrative approach to each poem evokes cryptic messages of a soothsayer that leap out of the archives of ancient oral histories, Eve mythology, and sage philosophy. From the Eve migration saga to urban social commentary, spoken word poetry, performance traditions and allegories seamlessly blend into folktales, music and critical self-reflection.

His first poem, 'Dotokpo,' embodies a dialogue between the past and the present, connecting ancestral wisdom with contemporary reflections. 'Dotokpo' (literally translated as 'be quiet') narrates the story of a disoriented child picking up pearls of wisdom at the feet of his grandfather:

My grandfather said to me, son, you're a child of this tradition,
No different from the ancestor of a thousand years who plunged his fingers into the mud,
From this mass today you call dirt
Pots were molded,
Pots which would keep water of life that sustained your great grandmother in youth
Your lips unfold with breath cushioned in language as though a new leaf unravels
bleoo... se gbɛa na fonu ne afie ne fa

Upon a navel, you were connected to a power to charge your existence
So you were strong enough to wander from source
And if you ever run out of energy, the fathers of my fathers left you drums, song, dance
from which your strength should stand
Fortified from the battery of those that wish we harm,

My son, my son,
He sang in the sun,
You are but a future ancestor,

The seeds sown before you are now fruits from which you must plant,
Do you see yourself above this humble rank?
A farmer of culture?

That the times are different mean not that your ties have shifted?
Child your nature defines you regardless of the environment that clothes you,
In this favor we found you can a favor be asked you?
In your hurry to achieve would you take us along? [...]
The eyes of souls who poured water on the walls of Agorkorli's Kingdom
Follow you in hope and prayer that you may become one with reason.



Figure 5. The late Tsiamegah of Anlo State, John Koblah Adzrah, pouring libation in honor of the ancestors during the 2019 Hogbetsotso festival at Anloga, Ghana. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Yom's mention of Agorkorli's kingdom in *Dotokpo* is a reference to the mythical story of the Ewe migration from Notsie, a city in modern-day Togo, to their present location in the southeastern part of Ghana. According to legend, the Ewe people were originally part of the larger group of the Gbe-speaking people in Notsie. They lived under the rule of King Agorkorli, whose reign became increasingly tyrannical. To escape his oppression, the Ewe sought a means to flee Notsie without arousing suspicion. Some settled in present-day Togo, Benin, and Nigeria, while others continued to the Volta Region of modern-day Ghana. This migration story is a cornerstone of Ewe

identity, symbolizing their resilience, unity, and cultural cohesion. It continues to be celebrated and remembered through oral traditions, festivals, and cultural practices among Ewe people.

'Dotokpo' embodies the widespread belief of attributing supreme knowledge and wisdom to the ancestors. In most Ghanaian societies, logic and reason are considered the preserve of both the young and old, but elders defer to ancestral knowledge, spirit mediumship, and divination to penetrate the unknown. In 'Dotokpo,' ancestral wisdom as embodied by the grandfather evidently triumphs over the narrator's initial naïveté and complacency. Spoken word poetry is fused with reasoning and terse philosophical logic. 'Dotokpo' is an intellectual call to arms, meant to awaken Africans to their centuries-old traditions, rites, customs, and sacred rituals to dislodge unproductive colonial teachings that mislead and disorient our current generation. The poem gives us a glimpse of Yom's longing to reconnect with his Ewe cultural roots and his deep appreciation for seemingly 'discarded' traditions.



Figure 6. Nugbuítówo performing during Hogbetsotso festival, Anloga, Ghana, 2019. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

'Finding Our Way Back Home': Self-Decolonization through Cultural Awareness and Artistic Expression

Over the past decade, I have been on a similar decolonial quest to Yom's as exemplified in 'Dotokpo.' 'Finding my way' to Ewe cultural roots has meant researching the arts of Ewe Vodun religion and the cultural philosophies embedded within it. Of particular importance to me is reclaiming spiritual values that have been passed down from generation to generation through

indigenous pedagogies. Despite the fear and superstition that surrounds Vodou art in most urban Ghanaian communities, I was drawn to its awe-inspiring aesthetic qualities and its spiritual significance.

My research journey began by questioning Ewe elders and shrine artists from an artistic perspective. I came to realize that Vodou art is not an assemblage of so-called 'idolatrous' artworks, but rather a complex system of knowledge and ancestral values that offers a unique perspective into African philosophy and Ewe cultural heritage. Vodou art teaches us about the power of ancestors and the interconnectedness of nature and society, which has shaped my understanding of the world. Like Yom, who draws inspiration from Ewe orality and ancestral knowledge, my personal engagement with Vodou art helped me to reclaim my identity and connected me to broader indigenous knowledge systems.

My immersion into Vodou aesthetics has exposed me to an endless supply of creative ideas and aesthetics influences I frequently experiment and explore to develop new creative expressions. My paintings have assumed more cultural significance ever since I reconnected with Ewe cultural roots and spiritual beliefs. By incorporating elements of Vodou visual culture into my artwork, I am able to create unique aesthetic forms that are grounded in my own culture.

In this sense, Yom and I have both come to appreciate the richness and complexity of Ewe culture and committed ourselves to sharing this knowledge with others, particularly the younger generation. In retrospect, I remember my encounter with Vodou art as a young teen during my high school days with a deep sense of appreciation and burning desire to re-educate myself, something which I recall in a previous text:

'This is authentic art, this is my culture, these are my people, this is where I come from, I'm a child of the Land, this is where I shall be buried when I join the ranks of the noble Ancestors, it would only be wise for me to begin my spiritual journey now' (Adjei 2019).

In Ewe societies, children are tasked by society with transmitting culture for posterity. Hence, it is imperative for the older generation to foster cultural education, to guide the younger generation in a continuous cycle of education. It is quite common to see children being led publicly by elders during cultural performances such as festivals, funerary processions, and spiritual ceremonies. Elders are looked upon as knowledge holders who must guide young members of society.



Figure 7. Nugbuitwo seated in preparation for their performance at the Hogbetsotso festival, Anloga, 2019. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Like a prodigal child who lost his 'way home' (identity) and found it again through personal education and self-discovery, Yom is now concerned with the transmission of cultural education and mentoring the current and forthcoming generations of Africans. He strives to make them culturally aware and firmly rooted in their history and multilayered identities. Through this self-decolonizing process, Yom is realizing his grandfather's prophetic words about a young child growing into a future ancestor and fulfilling his life's task of becoming a 'Farmer of Culture.' Yom's autobiographical narrative and self-decolonizing approach employed in 'Dotokpo' emphasize personal experiences over dogma and subverts drab theoretical approaches to decolonization.

In his own words, Yom recounts how self-decolonization influenced his journey in art and culture as a poet:

'Self-decolonization and the awareness that comes with it gave me a perspective from which I was able to give birth to the *Alter Native* EP where through harnessing all the influences colonial and indigenous knowledge available to me I was able to present a piece of art which transcends the limitations of leaning too hard on one narrative or the other. Self-decolonization made it possible to present myself and thoughts from my indigenous self whilst transforming colonial effects into tools to our collective advantage' (2023, personal communication).¹⁰

Indeed, Yom's newfound sense of cultural awareness greatly influenced the rhythms in the poems on the EP. The cultural influences that shaped the verses on *Alter Native* span from all over the West African coast as well as the

diaspora. According to Yom, he intentionally crafted the EP as

'a cultural sound that encompasses elements of black African culture and music [while still] projecting a distinct cultural identity, the song "Dotokpo" the first song on the EP involves a conversation between my grandfather and I, where he makes a plea that I do not shirk my deep Ewe roots in an attempt to tell my story, that I maintain my center amidst all the influences foreign and local which have affected my contemporaries and I over the years' (2023, personal communication).¹¹

Heeding his grandfather's call, Yom blends West African and diasporan sounds with modern Ghanaian culture and personal narratives, reflecting his deep Ewe roots and unique cultural identity.

Yom and I are not the only artists reclaiming neglected cultural values. Many other African artists, like for instance El Anatsui, Wiz Kudozor, or Peju Layiwola, have also relaunched their creative careers and developed their own unique aesthetic by incorporating artistic elements of cultural heritage into their work. The tendency to incorporate creative influences, cultural depth, authenticity, and rich layers of traditional value to their artistic expressions is quite evident.

The importance of indigenous creative practices to self-decolonization is



Figure 8. A young child poses in front of Togbui Adzima Shrine wall in Klikor, Volta Region (2016). Mural by Shrine muralist Noble Kunyegbe. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.



Figure 9. A group of German academics appreciating my artwork, *Shaka's Military Reforms* (130 cm x 175 cm, 2017) during an exhibition in Accra. © Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

further emphasized in an interview between Walter D. Mignolo and his fellow *Decolonization* editorial board member Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández. In this interview, Mignolo emphasized the importance of decolonial options and their integration into current political and cultural dynamics, highlighting the need for decolonial thinkers and practitioners to operate within complex power dynamics. He further elaborates on the range of options available to artists committed to decolonial work as they navigate contemporary art worlds shaped by competing norms and based on diverging epistemologies and conceptions of creation and sensory experience. He talks about indigenous conceptions of and approaches to creative work, suggesting that indigenous practices have a central role to play in how we deal with the colonial wound through decolonial healing (Gaztambide-Fernández 2014: 1). Yom's music operates in a similar decolonial aesthetic framework, blending contemplative stanzas, literary devices, indigenous influences from celebrated poets, and elements of traditional Ghanaian music.

'Here Comes Bebe Appetizing': Reframing Womanhood and Motherhood in Yom's Poetic Expressions

In exploring social issues on *Alter Native*, it is essential to engage with Yom's portrayals of womanhood and motherhood. An examination of the social dynamics of gender and familial relationships in Yom's work offers insights into the delicate balance between aesthetic expression, poetic license, and the potential for stereotypical representation. Yom's poems could be seen

as a catalyst for discussions about how contemporary African artists grapple with and reinterpret traditional gender roles in a rapidly changing world, contributing to the ongoing discourse on gender and representation in post-colonial societies.

For instance, 'Bebe,' a poem rich in sensual imagery and complex metaphors, requires a closer reading to discern its deeper sociocultural implications. An ode to the African woman, this poem constructs 'thought experiments' on seduction, lust, forbidden fantasies, and sensual pleasures. The erotic poem is softly spoken over rock-steady instrumentals performed by members of SenkuLive band. The sexual innuendos woven into the poem blend smoothly into the low tempo mood. Inspired by Barrington Levy's signature style, the chorus, sung by Villy, blends in smoothly:

'For there go bebe
Inspiration advertising
Metaphors perched on
Plenty buttocks fill by-standing masons
And gaping locked jaws seem synonymous

And so I must intervene with the shout of an *ayeekoo* in a hope that
They may be released from the spell of Medusa in her waist beads
Here comes bebe appetizing
Walking to me like I was King [...]
Longing for her soft skin literally rendered butter by shea [...]
Bebe is a tease
Like I was a village drunk and palm wine is what she sells [...]
For bebe be killing me softly.'



Figure 10. Helen Appiah-Ampofo, Yom, and Villy interacting with the audience after listening to 'Bebe.'
© Sela Kodjo Adjei, all rights reserved, used with permission.

'Bebe' reminds us that confessions are morally and erotically charged. 'Bebe' captures the sexual vulnerability of randy men attracted by the powerful charm of what Yom considers as an 'appetizing bebe' in all her glory, purity, and divine essence.

However, from a feminist perspective, it is essential to address concerns about the potential objectification of women and to explore the deeper cultural and decolonial contexts at play here. The poem, on its surface, is vulnerable to critique, as it appears to perpetuate stereotypical depictions of African women as mere 'objects' of sensual desire, reinforcing patriarchal views. Notwithstanding, a deeper interpretation could reveal a commentary on the complexities of gender dynamics in post-colonial African societies. By employing vivid, sensory imagery and metaphors, Yom portrays the African woman as an embodiment of strength and allure, but this portrayal also risks reducing her to an exoticized and eroticized figure. It is therefore crucial to juxtapose the image Yom draws with the broader backdrop of African storytelling traditions, where female characters often symbolize resilience, desire, cultural depth, and spiritual power.

From a decolonial context, despite Yom's strong desire to reconnect with his Ewe culture, his references to Medusa in the poem 'Bebe' alludes to Western notions of beauty and desire connected to a figure from Greek mythology. Medusa is known for her enchanting beauty, with snakes for hair and an ability to turn men to stone with her gaze. While Medusa is widely perceived as a symbol of female power, charm, and danger, she is not quite associated with Ghanaian aesthetic standards of feminine beauty nor sensual attraction. Hence, Yom's use of Medusa as feminine aesthetic 'ideal' and a reference within the context of decolonial thought might be perceived as problematic by African literary critics (see Chinweizu et al. 1980).

Yet, other tracks on the album appear to be more nuanced autobiographical sketches of Yom's own life stories and personal struggles. 'Paa Joe' tells the story of a frustrated youth struggling with substance addiction, the pursuit of worldly pleasures, and identity crises—from the perspective of his mother. The solemn humming and retrospective lamentations at the beginning of 'Paa Joe' transition into the evocative stanza below:

'Paa Joe,
You drink and you smoke that which makes chimneys choke
And you dedicate your existence to frustrate and provoke.
You've invoked the gods imbedded in the core of the yoke,

Curses,
Paa Joe,
Curses,
Descending on the top of your head.
They've embossed the scalp of your head with footprints.

Whose sins do you bear?
Whose shame do you wear?

Worn out old folks like us can only see the promise the premise upon which we've raised you.
Yet it seems even compromise is at a price we cannot pry away from your hands.

You possess a purity Paa Joe,
A dangerously religious desire to attain immediate goals regardless of what they are.'

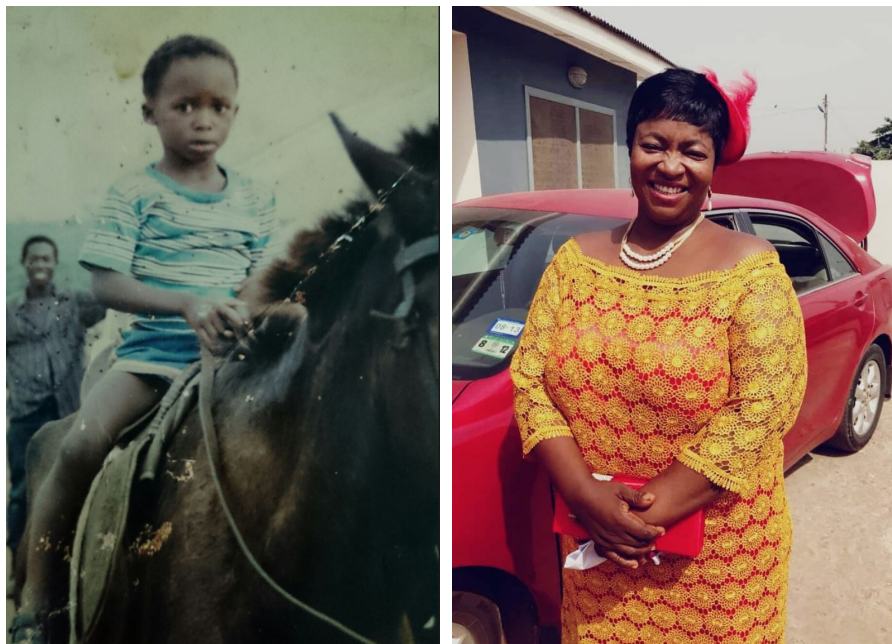


Figure 11. Left: A photo of Yom riding a horse in his childhood days. Right: Yom's mother, Mrs. Bernice. Yom shares the same birthday as his mother. © Yom Nfojoh, all rights reserved, used with permission.

'Paa Joe' is a poem that recounts the very familiar situation of a passionate plea from an African mother seeking to reason with her wayward child, perhaps misled by peer pressure and urban culture. After several attempts at a prim and proper upbringing, their deep relationship turns sour. In her pensive lamentations, she simply cannot comprehend how things went wrong. This leads her to reprimand and probe her son Paa Joe with a flurry of rhetorical questions and reminders of how they were both deeply connected by maternal love during his childhood days:

'Desecrating my home with a variety of bosoms and back sides Queen of Sheba couldn't comprehend
Shame on your wicked heart blackened by the soot of burned down reason [...]
A descendant of dragon turned snake spitting venom
You've turned my mind into a playground see-sawing in my cerebellum

Say something, don't leave me with nothing
"Paa Joe, say something."

Despite his hedonistic pleasures and carefree spirit, Paa Joe expresses moral self-inquiry and remorse for his misguided actions. This self-revulsion eventually leads him to rely on motherly care and enduring love to save his ailing soul. Upon the repeated probe 'Paa Joe, say something,' Yom utters this pithy remark in the concluding verse of the poem:

"Maa... I'm Hungry,"
"Maa... I'm Hungry."

Yom's metaphor expresses his soul's thirst, not for nourishment per se, but for wisdom, vigor, love, and compassion from his own mother. These serve to nurture, guide, and realign his destiny to fulfill his life's true mission—being a poet and an artist. Here, Yom presents his audience with a glimpse of how a reckless rebellion morphs into a radical act of reconciliation, a return to the cradle to tap into the well of life and wisdom.

Despite Yom's dreary reflections, 'Paa Joe' blends melancholic jazz-style instrumentation with the hauntingly beautiful voice of Ghanaian singer Verony. Verony's harmonious crooning in the background envelopes the record in an air of sentimentality that mentally lingers long after hearing the poem.



Figure 12. Photoshoot promoting Yom's EP *Alter Native* on his Instagram page. © Yom Nfojoh, all rights reserved, used with permission.

In 'Paa Joe,' personal narrative, self-disclosure, and repetitive self-renunciation are presented as a means of escape from the narrator's physical and spiritual woes—'hunger,' 'thirst,' 'brain fag,'¹² 'physical exhaustion,' and 'remorse.' In his discussion of confession, Michel Foucault presents insights into how self-disclosure releases the burden of guilt from the mind of the confessant. For Foucault (1998: 61–2), confession is a powerful act of speech. It is a ritual act that involves both revealing oneself and facing a figure of authority who judges, guides, and potentially offers absolution. As Andreas Fejes points out, in Michel Foucault's work, 'confession does not specifically limit itself to the confession taking place in church, but it also signifies the most private and intimate relationships that we have with our lovers, family, friends, and with ourselves' (2013: 3).

In 'Paa Joe,' Yom clearly relies on maternal love, care, and guidance for eternal salvation, similar to the confessional path suggested by Foucault. In retrospect, Yom alludes to the fact that his personal journey into self-disclosure, self-decolonization, and cultural awareness has been a learning curve that enriched his life experience ever since he embarked on *Alter Native*:

'I have also learnt that expressing vulnerability or self-disclosure is more empowering than it is demeaning as it sets one free from the guilt of the past and emboldens the individual in taking up bigger tasks as the weight of regret and shame is finally left behind' (2023, personal communication).¹³

By using a mother figure as a narrator and witness to Paa Joe's confession, Yom implies that it is African women who are the authority figures able to judge young men, guide them, and ultimately free them from their shame and regret. More broadly, one might conclude that there are pros and cons to the fact that Yom's lyrics emphasize the personal and confessional. Sometimes this means that they are limited, for example, by a male perspective that objectifies women; but, on the other hand, this personal approach allows him to convey the moral stature of African women.

Poetry as Social Commentary

Yom is also heavily influenced by real life events and issues that occur within his immediate environment. In the song 'Sakawa,' Yom addresses several key issues linked to social vices like *Sakawa*.¹⁴ He was cautious not to be judgmental about the scourge of *Sakawa* and the get-rich-quick schemes (e.g. internet fraud, romance scams, online identity theft) some Ghanaian youths of today indulge in. According to Yom, these people rely on ruse and guile as an 'escape route' out of poverty and hardship. The end eventually justifies the means, which is captured in this verse:

"Damirifa due" to poverty [...]
Lately he swims in clarity
In his newfound future and its brightness.'

Archetypal images of trickery still creep into the social fabrics of Ghana and Nigeria as, for instance, in the form of *Sakawa*, 419 scams, or Yahoo scams. Traditionally, trickery as a tactic is deeply enshrined in West African storytelling traditions such as *Anansem* among the Akans and *Ijapa* trickster tales among the Yorubas. Ananse, the archetypal trickster who embodies deception and manipulation, is either abhorred as a villain or elevated as a hero depending on the circumstances. In the verses of 'Sakawa,' Yom poses as a practical guide disclosing guarded 'street codes' employed by *Sakawa* 'strategists' and consummate manipulators, who have perfected Ananse's timeless mental coercion techniques into an 'exact science':

'Find a woman or a man in the West hopefully is depressed and hard pressed on finding love
You must go in to mine deep but do not let your mind scheme be exposed with a fixation on money
scratch at the crust
Gain her trust
Sugarcoat your words with honey

Let him propose
Pose from the posts of business for those who possess the dough
Say you're an African Prince
Whose family gold must be sold [...]
Or be a simple lover [...]

Soon she will wire funds to your ailing mother's plight
Or visa for your flight [...]
He can't wait to unleash his Ananse stories on the World Wide Web [...]

In two weeks she'll be smiling to the bank
She just sends a third of her savings to a fiancée Prince all the way in Ghana
To enable the sale of his gold for plenty more [...]

Nodding her head to music from her stereo as she types a reply to:
"I is love you"
She thinks his English seems pretty bad
But she is reassured by the stereotype.'

These lyrics draw deep influences from Ghanaian folktales. Yom's stories mirror such archetypal traits of mythical figures, which firmly connects his characters to a wide range of pertinent issues and common

personality traits we encounter in our daily lives within most contemporary societies. Sakawa reveals Yom's affinity to the grassroots in Ghanaian societies. He is treating impoverished young people with understanding, praising their creativity instead of blaming them for their situation; he is advocating for embracing cunning as a means to redistribute wealth back to Africa; he uses empathy and humor to draw in and empower listeners to critique injustice as well.

The last song on *Alter Native*, 'Somebody,' is a social critique masked as 'somebody's story.' This scathing critique specifically focuses on envy, prejudice, ethnocentrism, ethnic rivalry, and needless conflicts that stall development, social progress, and national unity. A fitting extract from the poem summarizes the premise of 'Somebody':

'If there is love in this country I don't feel it
Mental mutilations muting a nation
Eves and Ashantis locked in dispute
While our towns remain shanty.'

Yom views art as an effective tool for decolonization because it requires artists to reshape their own minds, becoming a positive example for others:

'The great Fela Kuti once said that as an artist the whole idea about your environment must be represented in the music and in the arts, more or less documenting the times. [...] It is the responsibility of the artist to present the facts, varying perspectives, cause and effects of issues so as to trigger thought and reflection within the individual. [...] Self-decolonization when done right should place the artist in a role of assistance, [...] arming listeners and the general public with the tools by which they can begin to embark on their own journey towards self-decolonization' (2023, personal communication).¹⁵

Concluding Remarks

Yom Nfojoh's music is a powerful tool for liberation, decolonization, and social transformation. His music, storytelling, and spoken word poetry serve as a platform for critical self-reflection, self-care, and healing.

His narrative approach is an inspiration for others to embrace their many-layered identities in their search for self-determination. Yom's work draws on the power of self-reflection in the journey of decolonization, suggesting that understanding and challenging past colonial influences is crucial for personal and societal growth. He emphasizes the significance of staying connected to one's cultural heritage, showcasing how ancestral wisdom and traditions are vital in shaping identity and guiding future paths. Finally, through his confessional style, Yom teaches us that there is strength in vulnerability and that openly addressing personal and communal challenges can lead to healing and empowerment.

His record illustrates the power of artistic expression, particularly

how music and poetry can be effective mediums for expressing personal struggles and societal critiques, offering both catharsis as well as a platform for raising awareness. Often confronting societal issues, Yom's poetry tackles complex problems, confronting and critically engaging with phenomena like corruption or social injustice. Yom envisions art as a potent tool for decolonization, capable of fostering critical thinking and reflection in individuals.

This essay has elucidated how Yom's artistic expressions transcend the personal, becoming a vehicle for societal transformation and self-decolonization. In essence, Yom Nfojoh's work, as explored in this essay, serves as a profound journey of self-discovery, cultural introspection, and social critique, demonstrating the power of art to inspire change and self-transformation within a broader socio-cultural context.

In conclusion, both myself and Yom Nfojoh's creative journey illuminate a shared pathway towards self-decolonization through the arts, underscoring a vital commitment to reclaiming and redefining African identity. Yom's work, with its deep engagement with cultural narratives and social critique, mirrors my own artistic exploration, highlighting how poetry and music can be transformative tools in challenging the colonial aftershock and envisioning new futures. Together, our creative endeavors contribute significantly to the broader dialogue on self-decolonization, demonstrating the power of art to inspire self-reflection, critical thinking, and provoke societal change.



Figure 13. Yom Nfojoh at Ghana's Independence Square. © Yom Nfojoh, all rights reserved, used with permission.

1. Dotokpo means 'be quiet' in the Ewe language.
2. The term 'Eurocentric' is used here as a concept rather than a geographic location; it covers the thoughts and practices of the Caucasian race.
3. Nationalism in this (African) context refers to advocacy of or support for political independence, identification with one's own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion of the interests of other colonial nations. Anyone who adheres to this logic within this context I call a nationalist; this is radically different from the fascist political ideology in Europe and elsewhere.
4. The Ewe people belong to an ethnic group primarily located in the Volta Region of Ghana, as well as in parts of Togo and Benin. They are known for their rich cultural heritage, which is deeply rooted in music, dance, textiles design, weaving, storytelling and Vodun art. The Ewe have a complex social structure that places great importance on kinship and community, with a strong emphasis on collective responsibility and social cohesion. Their language, Ewe, is part of the Gbe language group, and it plays a crucial role in preserving their cultural identity and oral traditions. Spirituality and religion also play significant roles in Ewe culture, with indigenous beliefs playing an integral role, particularly in the veneration of ancestors and the practice of Vodun, which permeates various aspects of their daily life and community rituals.
5. Popular music groups that drew heavily on Afro-fusion tinged with musical influences from highlife, Afro-rock, Caribbean calypso, percussion and neo-traditional music with elements and practices of other popular music genres.
6. Asentawaa P (2022, 10 August) Personal communication, e-mail, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.
7. Anonymous students (2022) Personal communication, text message, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.
8. The Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) was the military government that ruled Ghana following a coup d'état on 31 December 1981. Led by Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings, the PNDC regime was marked by a commitment to a radical and populist form of governance. The regime focused on anti-corruption measures and social justice, aiming to address the needs of the underprivileged in Ghanaian society. The PNDC stayed in power until 1992, when it laid the groundwork for a return to constitutional, democratic governance, leading to the establishment of the Fourth Republic of Ghana.
9. Like North Kaneshie and Sakumono, where Yom grew up in, both are suburbs of the Accra and Tema Metropolitan districts respectively.
10. Nfojoh Y (2023, 4 April) Personal communication, e-mail, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.
11. Nfojoh Y (2023, 4 April) Personal communication, e-mail, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.
12. See Ayonrinde OA et al. (2015) as well as Ola BA et al. (2009).
13. Nfojoh Y (2023, 4 April) Personal communication, e-mail, Yom Nfojoh's EP *Alter Native*.
14. Sakawa is a popular term used in Ghana to describe a combination of modern cyber fraud tactics and traditional African rituals. The practice involves engaging in various forms of internet fraud, often targeted at foreigners, and is believed to be empowered or enhanced by ritualistic and spiritual practices. These rituals are thought to invoke mystical powers to aid in the success of the cyber fraud activities. Sakawa is not just a criminal enterprise but is also deeply embedded in the spiritual beliefs of its practitioners. For more information, see Oduro-Frimpong (2014).
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