

The Soko Psalm Within Religious Communities of African Descent

An Ethnomusicological and Sociolinguistic Analysis of the African-Surinamese
Sacred Transition Ritual

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Publication Details

- 1st Publication: Lisibeti Music Performing Arts in collaboration with Naks (2016)
- 2nd Publication: Caribbean Sheet Music Publishing (2025)
- Fields of Study: Ethnomusicology, Sociolinguistics & Cultural Anthropology
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Keywords: Soko Psalm, Banya Prey, Kabra Prey, Winti, Syncretism, Sranantongo, Pentatonicism, Afro-Surinamese Intangible Cultural Heritage

Abstract

The Soko psalm (also known as the *sokko* song) forms a crucial, yet historically under-researched, component of the intangible cultural heritage of the Afro-Surinamese community. Manifesting within the *banya prey* (the dramatic-ritual Banya theater) and the *kabra* or *jorka prey* (ancestor veneration), the Soko psalm represents a profound religio-musical syncretism. Here, West African cosmological principles, Islamic influences, and Christian elements (primarily originating from the traditions of the Moravian Church/Hernhutters and the Roman Catholic mission) merge.

This study offers an integrative analysis of:

1. The etymological and geographical origin of the term *sokko*.
2. The musical-analytical parameters (pentatonicism, free rubato, call-and-response, and instrumentation).
3. The morpho-phonological transformations of Sranan song texts (epenthesis, elision, euphonic suffixes, and African relict languages).
4. The psycho-social and spiritual function of the genre as a transition and consolation ritual.
5. An annotated textual edition of 23 traditional Soko psalms including their esoteric-philosophical interpretation.

1. Introduction: Singing on the threshold of two worlds

When night falls over a *kabra prey* in the coastal region of Suriname—the ceremonial gathering in honor of the deceased ancestors (*kabra* or *jorka*)—the acoustic space of the ritual site undergoes a fundamental transformation. The tight, polyrhythmic percussion of the *apinti*, *poku-dron*, or *kwa-kwa bangi* gives way to an intimate, sustained style of singing. A single voice, the *trokiman* (lead singer), initiates an undulating melody *a cappella*. Free from a rigid meter, moving within an elastic *rubato*, the response follows from the choir, the *pikiman* (answering singers).

Transcendental Bridge of Souls

The transitional moment between the material world (*a-sese*) and the realm of the deceased (*dedekondre* or *Samandow*) calls at crucial junctures not for fierce drumbeats, but for the unassisted human voice. As Stephen (1986) and Wooding (1979) argue, these chants fulfill a fundamental transitional phase. Historically, they enabled enslaved people and their descendants to harmonize the Christian dogmas imposed upon them with their own suppressed African cosmology (Winti).

The Soko psalm is not a passive adoption of European Protestant or Catholic hymns, but an active reinterpretation (re-coding) in which the Christian liturgy is transformed into a vehicle for communication with the *gran-afo* (the distant ancestors).

2. Historical-demographic origins & etymology

The genesis of the Afro-Surinamese population and its artistic forms of expression must be read against the backdrop of the Transatlantic slave trade from the late 17th and 18th centuries onward. Alongside well-documented ethnic groups—such as the Mandingo (Senegambia), Ewe and Fon (Dahomey), Akan/Twi/Fanti (Gold Coast), and various Bantu populations from the Congo-Angola region—oral genealogies and ritual languages preserve memories of lesser-archived tribes, including the Adja, Neme (Weme), Oku, Mbata, and Dagomba (Wooding, 1979: 32).

Origin and Development of 'Sokko'

The etymology of the term *sokko* (or *soko*) features three significant and interacting trajectories:

Trajectory	Historical Anchor / Source	Key Term / Citation	Context & Significance
Geographical-Ethnic Trajectory	Sosso / Susu tribe (Sierra Leone / Guinea)	"Sokko"	Direct link to the Sosso/Susu people, frequently designated as Sokko in early colonial cartography and ethnography.

Trajectory	Historical Anchor / Source	Key Term / Citation	Context & Significance
	<i>(Hostmann, 1850; Wooding, 1979)</i>		
Islamic-Trade Trajectory	Trading city Nsoko / Nshogho (Banda Kingdom) <i>(Wüllschlägel, 1856; Stedman, 1796)</i>	<i>"a habi da soko bribi"</i> <i>(He adheres to the Sokko faith / He is Muslim)</i>	Mande and Hausa Muslim trade hub for gold/kola nuts. Lexicography confirms the term's association with Islam; Stedman notes the <i>(an)sokko bania</i> .
Socio-Linguistic Trajectory	Fante exonym <i>Dunco</i> via Gold Coast slave forts <i>(Tauxier, 1932; Beltrán, 1946)</i>	<i>"yu don Sokko"</i> <i>(You foolish/dumb person)</i>	Coastal Fante used <i>Dunco</i> (captive/ignorant interior person) for Nsoko groups. Pejoratively crystallized in Sranantongo, reflecting inter-ethnic hierarchies.

3. Syncretic matrix: The dual belief structure

Syncretism within the Afro-Surinamese religious context is defined as the dynamic merging, reinterpreting, and rearranging of elements from disparate religious systems (Stephen, 1986: 14). As Surinamese linguist and cultural philosopher Christian Eersel (2015) argues, "pure faith" does not exist in a vacuum; religion continuously arises and evolves within a community through cultural exchange and adaptation.

The Soko psalm serves as a textbook example of this syncretic matrix, in which external Christian frameworks act as a protective and elevating shell over deeper African and esoteric content:

External / Christian Form	Inner / Afro-Cosmological Meaning
Monotheistic God / "Gado"	Harmonized with <i>Anana Kedyaman Ponpon</i> (the all-encompassing Creator-Source).
Psalm and Hymn Texts	Function during the <i>dede oso</i> (funeral wake) as invocations to guide the spiritual passage of the soul.
Holy Water & Bible	Holy water serves for <i>kaseri</i> (ritual cleansing); the open Bible or crucifix acts as a <i>tapu</i> (spiritual protective shield).
Saints / Angels	Adaptation of Catholic saint veneration (Mary, <i>Santu</i>) to invoke specific <i>Winti</i> or guardian spirits.
Typology of Spirits	Strict division between <i>Kabra</i> (baptized ancestors who recognize Christian liturgy) and <i>Profen</i> (unbaptized, "African" ancestors).

Diachronic Dynamics

The introduction of younger Soko psalms (such as *Maria Boto* or chants echoing Marian devotion) reflects the intensification of the Roman Catholic mission in Suriname from the second half of the 19th century onward. This stands in contrast to the older 18th-century influence of the Moravian Church (Hernhutters, active since 1735).

4. Musical-analytical and linguistic characteristics

4.1 Scale, Melody, and Rhythm

Musically and structurally, the Soko psalm breaks resolutely with Western classical hymnody (such as the four-part chorale settings of the Moravian Church):

- **Penta- and Hexatonicism:** The melodic contour of the Soko psalm is almost always based on an anhemitonic pentatonic scale (five-tone scale without semitones). This is characteristic of both West African vocals and melismatic recitation forms from the Islamic tradition.

- Free Rubato & Metrical Freedom: Unlike the rigid, polyrhythmic *dron-poku* (drum music), the Soko psalm has no fixed meter. The *trokiman* improvises along the length of the lines, while the response of the *pikiman* organically breathes in and out (*rubato*).
- Call-and-Response (Antiphony): The vocal structure follows the African antiphonal tradition. The *trokiman* sets the textual and emotional direction, after which the choir joins in. As A.M. Jones (1959) notes regarding West African vocal forms, the closing notes of the lead singer and the entry of the chorus frequently overlap (*overlapping call-and-response*).
- A Cappella & Minimalist Idiophonic Instrumentation: Large membranophones (*apinti*, *kawina-drons*) are absent in the Soko psalm. The singing is primarily *a cappella*, occasionally supported by subtle metal or wooden idiophones:
 - Gengen / Bell: A small metal bell used to command spiritual attention.
 - Saka / Sik'sak': Rattle filled with seeds to create a rustling, continuous acoustic carpet.
 - Chapu: A cast-iron hoe blade, played with a nail or metal rod.
 - Ttu: A twisted triton shell or large conch used for signal calls.

4.2 Morpho-Phonological Transformations of Sranan

During the sacred performance of the Soko psalm, spoken Sranantongo undergoes specific linguistic transformations to elevate the vocal material into esoteric *Winti-tongo* (Eersel, 2013):

- Epenthesis (Vowel Insertion): Consonant clusters are broken up by inserting vowels to restore a strict Consonant-Vowel (CV) pattern, conforming to the phonotactics of West African languages.
- Euphonic Suffixes & Vowel Lengthening: Song lines are aesthetically and emotionally extended by suffixes such as *-ana*, *-ne*, or concluded with lamenting exclamations (*eh*, *oh*).
- Assimilation and Geminization: Words merge during fast or sustained recitation.
- Sacred Language Layers (African Relicts): Beyond Sranantongo, the psalms contain relict words and formulas from Luango (Kikongo/Bantu) and Kromanti (Twi/Fanti), as well as elements from secret languages such as Opinti, Kumanti, Luangokese, Wawi, and Chamba.
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5. The Ritual framework: The Banya prey & kabra rites

Within the continuum of Afro-Surinamese performative and religious culture, the Banya Prey occupies a central place. As the Surinamese storyteller and folklore expert Alex de Drie (1902–1989) memorably stated, this tradition was handed down by the *gran-afo* (the distant ancestors):

"A kulturu fu wi granafo, no wi afo bika wi afo na daya a gebore, ma wi gran afo [...] A kulturu prati a seybi pisi [...] a fosi wan na banya, a tweede wan na Susa, a derde wan na laku, a vierde wan na kanga, a vijfde na fayaston, a zesde na anansitori, a zevende wan na soko psalm."

— Alex de Drie (Martinus-Guda, 2005: 17)

The Seven Divisions of Banya Culture

1. Banya — Spoken-word opera

2. Susa — Male dance duel
3. Laku — Satirical theater
4. Kanga — Children's game rhythms
5. Fayaston — Rituals of ordeal
6. Anansi-tori — Storytelling tradition
7. Soko psalm — Sacred conclusion & consolation

In this seven-part Banya framework, the Soko psalms serve as the concluding, sacred pillar. Where ordinary Winti spirits originate in *wintikondre* (the realm of natural forces), the Kabra speak and listen from *dedekondre* (*Samandow*).

During the *kabra-mora* (the sacrificial feast for the ancestors), the Soko psalm is the ultimate spiritual bridge: all human suffering, historical trauma from the plantation era, and contemporary family matters are presented to the ancestors through this elevated singing (Zaalman, 2006: 57).

6. Performative matrix and performance practice

Performative Parameter	Manifestation within the Soko Psalm
Accompaniment	Primarily <i>a cappella</i> . Supported by idiophones: <i>gengen</i> (bell), <i>saka</i> (rattle), <i>chapu</i> (metal blade), or <i>ttu</i> (conch shell). Strict absence of <i>apinti</i> or <i>kawina</i> drums.
Vocal Structure	<i>Trokiman</i> (lead singer) & <i>Pikiman</i> (choir). Free <i>rubato</i> . The lead singer alternately introduces new lines of text, to which the choir responds in a formulaic manner.
Attire & Decorum	Stately mourning or reverent attire in ritual contexts; primarily dominated by white, dark blue, and purple (<i>kabra</i> colors).
Spatial Organization	The <i>trokiman</i> and immediate family/initiates move within an inner ceremonial circle around the <i>pangi</i> or the <i>doti-stra</i> f (offering point); onlookers remain in the outer ring.

Performative Parameter	Manifestation within the Soko Psalm
Historical Masters & Interpreters	Alex de Drie, Blaaspijp, Ma Deli, Joosje Montroos, Pa Monti (Eduard Struiken), Willem Nooitmeer, Ursie Nijman, Emma Mais, Friede Kom, Anne Goedhart, Wilgo Baarn, Noet (James Struiken), Humbert Oosterwolde.

7. Soko Psalms – 23 Songs, insight and philosophy

Below is the annotated textual edition of 23 preserved Soko psalms, based on fieldwork, oral tradition, and codification within Surinamese intangible heritage. The texts are provided with literary transcriptions and their deeper, esoteric-philosophical interpretation (*Insight & Philosophy*).

1. ALA PINA NA DYARI SMA

Ala pina na dyari sma

Ala pina na dyari sma

Kopido den na yana

Kopido den na yana

Insight & philosophy: *Everyone carries personal responsibility for their choices in life. With the inherited wisdom of those who came before us (the ancestors), we possess the means to bear and fulfill our own destiny.*

2. AFORON DYE MAYNO

Aforon dye mayno

Aforon dye mayno

Aforon dyema, Aforon dyema

Mi kisim tama

Mi dyukum nyama

Mi nyam mam ne nyan

Aforon dyema, Aforon dyema

Insight & philosophy: *Despite historical struggles, hardship, and physical trials, perseverance and positive spiritual commitment will ultimately lead to victory and prosperity for future generations.*

3. AMBA LA LA LA LA LAY

Amba la la la la lay

Amba la la la la lay

Amba la la la la lay

Emeli van Kre

Insight & philosophy: *Contemporary humanity ("Emeli") must realize that the individual of the past—spiritually anchored in the day-name "Amba" (a woman born on Saturday)—carries the core essence and wisdom of life.*

4. APIAMBA

Apiaba tobi amba

Apiaba ben tuma

Apiaba tobi amba

Apiaba ben tuma

Insight & philosophy: *(Luango influence; 'piaba' = great/exalted). A homage to womanhood ("amba") as the preserver, bearer, and protector of human life and the continuous spiritual flow.*

5. AFYE, MI DAFYO

Afye, ê Mi dafyo, ô

Afye, ê Mi dafyo, ô

Ke mama, yu libi mi so din din din

Ke papa, yu libi mi so din din din

Afye, ô Mi dafyo, ô

Afye, ê Mi dafyo, ô

Insight & philosophy: *An emotional lamentation and plea directed at deceased parents and revered elders not to abandon their descendants helpless, but to assist them with cosmic wisdom.*

6. AY MI NO TAKI MI KAN DU

Ay mi no taki mi kan du

Ay mi no taki mi kan du

Ay mi no bari mi kan du

Ay mi no bari mi kan du

Oh mi no taki mi kan du

Ma mi kon fu proberi

Efu tongo sa kruderi 'a kondre

Insight & philosophy: An invocation of deep humility and self-reflection. One does not boast or rely on power, but seeks reconciliation within the community through harmonious dialogue and gentle words.

7. DUNUN TINA

Dundun Tina

Dundun Tina

Dundun Tina

Mi sisa ofrena

Insight & philosophy: In moments of absolute inner stillness and surrender, humans connect with the Almighty (Anana) and ask for enlightenment through the wise ancestors of distant generations.

8. GI MI LO

Gi mi lo

Gi mi lo memre mi na doymi, ô

Ma na wa' odi mi kon bari dya, ê

Insight & philosophy: A humble greeting to one's lineage and family line (lo). The descendants approach the ancestral source in full reverence to plead for recognition and spiritual protection.

9. KON MI YANGA

Kon mi yanga mi bakriye,

Kon mi yanga batalew

Kon mi yanga mi bakriye,

Kon mi yanga batalew

Insight & philosophy: *Acceptance of human destiny and life mission. Everything in the universe fulfills a specific purpose; one must walk one's own path with dignity and joy.*

10. KOWRU WATRA

Kowru watra, ê

Soso kowru watra, ô

Kowru watra, ê

Soso kowru watra, ô

Kowru watra na krabasi

Wi kon iti na goron

F' te w'o nyan faro

Syen no musu kisi wi

Insight & philosophy: *Ritual libation psalm. Cool water from the calabash (krabasi) is poured onto the earth (goron) to cleanse the spirit. It asks for spiritual purity and protection against societal disgrace (syen).*

11. MA MI DOFO

Ma mi dofo, ma dofo, mi dofo mi

Ma mi dofo, ma dofo, mi dofo mi

Mi yere, ô mi n' e kon

Mi yere, ô mi n' e kon

Syen moro mi, ô

Syen kiri suma pkin

Insight & philosophy: A moral warning against impure thoughts and malicious actions. Ethics are central: the shame and negative energetic consequences of misdeeds ultimately fall back on one's own children.

12. MI AFO (Mi Af' E Gwe)

Mi af' e gwe

Mi af' e gwe

Te y' go waka bun

Mi af' e gwe

Mi af' e gwe

Te y' go waka bun

Kowru winti sa tya' y' gwe

(Standard Sranan orthography:)

Mi Afo e gwe

Te yu e gwe

Te yu go, waka bun

Kowru winti sa tyari yu gwe

Insight & philosophy: Classic funeral psalm sung upon the departure of a revered ancestor. One wishes the soul a safe journey to Samandow, carried by the gentle, cooling breeze (kowru winti) of Anana.

13. MI DOSA

Mi si Banya

Mi dosa

Mi banya

Mi dosa

Mi dosa

Mi dosa

Mi dey stari, ê

Mi dosa

Mi dey stari, ê

Mi dosa

Mi si banya

Mi dosa, mi dosa, mi dosa

Insight & philosophy: A glorification of inner guidance and intellectual heritage. The day star (dey stari) symbolizes divine light and the enlightenment bestowed through ancestral tradition (banya).

14. MI NA LEBAUMA

M' 'a lebauma

M' 'a lebauma

M' 'a lebauma

M' 'a lebauma

M' 'a lebauma

Ma tide neti m'o bar gi negre

Mi a lebauma

(Standard Sranan orthography:)

Mi na leba uma

Ma tide neti mi o bari

Insight & philosophy: Invocation of the Leba spirit (the guardian of paths, boundaries, and cleansing). The song urges the community toward spiritual hygiene and the clearing of negative entities.

15. OFRENA

Ofrena

Ofrena

Maria but' mi, ô

Ofrena

Insight & philosophy: Syncretic offering psalm where Catholic Marian devotion blends with African surrender. It is a plea for comprehensive grace and spiritual protection from the creative Mother-Source.

16. O MI YANSI GRE

O mi yansi gre

O mi yansi gre mi yaya

O mi yansi gre

O mi yansi gre mi yaya

Kriboysi m' e g' na mi yaya

O mi yansi gre

Kriboysi m' e g' na mi yaya

O mi yansi gre

(Standard Sranan orthography:)

Kriboysi mi e go na mi yaya

Insight & philosophy: A chant honoring the exalted ancestral mother figure (yaya). In times of spiritual distress, one returns to the original source of insight and counsel.

17. TE MI NO DE

Te mi no de

F' san w' e kar' kar' mi nen

Te mi no de

F' san w' e kar' kar' mi nen

Te mi o doro

Un' no m' way way mi nen

(Standard Sranan orthography:)

Te mi no de, fu san ede wi e kari mi nen

Te mi o doro, unu no musu way way mi nen

Insight & philosophy: *An urgent admonition from the ancestral realm. Calling upon the names of the ancestors (kari nen) is futile if one lives in discord on earth. Respect for the dead requires genuine brotherhood among the living.*

18. TORINA

Torina, torina

Mata greto torina

Torina, torina

Mata greto torina

Sa greto na mi ma greto

Sawre, mawre

Insight & philosophy: *(Soko psalm with strong Luango/African relict phrasing). A prayer for shelter against social and spiritual ruin. One asks the Almighty to turn adversity into harmony.*

19. UN NO YERE

U' no yere

Geng' e loy

Kar' mi afo k'moto

Na negre kondre

So wi kon begi wi afo

Soko, ê

Soko

Nyun gron

Unu memre den afo

Soko, ê

Soko

Nyun gron

(Standard Sranan orthography:)

Unu no yere gengen e loy kari mi afo komoto

Na negre kondre

Insight & philosophy: *The sound of the bell (gengen) rings to call the ancestors forth from the land of origin (negre kondre). They are asked to descend upon the "new ground" (nyun gron = Suriname) to support their descendants.*

20. UN OPO

U' opo, u' opo, ê

U' opo, ê

U' opo noya

U' opo, u' opo, ê

U' opo gran suma, u' opo noya

U' opo, u' opo, ê

U' opo gran suma

Na wan tor' u' m' kon yere

(Standard Sranan orthography:)

Un opo, un opo, ê

Un opo, gran suma

Un opo noya

Un opo, unu opo, ê

Un opo, grani suma

Na wan tori unu musu kon yere

Insight & philosophy: *A call to physical and spiritual rising. The community is earnestly summoned to stand out of deep respect for history and the lessons of the gran-suma (elders/ancestors).*

21. WI KON

Wi kon, wi kon dya

Wi kon, wi kon dya

Wi kon dya

A di wi kon

N' e w' e bar' na doti wan odi, ê

Bifo wi bar' libisma odi

W' e bar' a doti wan odi

Bifo libi suma odi, ê

Birt' o me bar odi, ê

Insight & philosophy: *Protocolary opening ritual. Before exchanging greetings with living bystanders (libisma), tribute is first paid to the Earth (a doti wan) and the ancestors resting within it.*

22. YUN DOYFI

Yun' doyfi un' no mus' nya' ala masra sir' a dyar', ô

Yun' doyfi un' no mus' nya' ala masra sir' a dyar', ô

Memre den gran suma, ê

Pamure Doyfi, ô

Un' no mu' nyan masra sira dyar', ô (siri na a dyari)

Doyfi, ô Un' no mu' nyan masra sira dya' ri, ô (siri na dyari)

Ya

T' a lep', ô

U' ala sa nyan en

Insight & philosophy: *Metaphorical lesson on sustainability and heritage. The doves (doyfi) must not eat all the seeds in the garden (siri na a dyari). One must not consume all resources, but preserve and sow them for future generations.*

23. DEN DE NA DOROSEY

Den d' 'a dorosey

Den d' 'a dorosey

Den d' 'a dorosey

Den d' 'a doro

Un no yere gengen

Un no yere saka

Den d' 'a dorosey

Den d' 'a dorosey

Den d' 'a dorosey

Den d' 'a dorosey

Den d' 'a doro

Un' no yere binta

Un' no yere tutu

Un' no yere a gruma

Den d' 'a dorosey

Insight & philosophy: Awareness psalm. Spiritual help, the ancestors, and cosmic knowledge are already standing outside at the door (den d' a dorosey). However, humans are often unaware of their presence due to a lack of inner hearing for sacred instruments (gengen, saka, tutu).

8. Conclusion

The Soko psalm transcends the boundaries of a historical relict or a purely aesthetic musical genre. It is a living, syncretic monument in which the complex diaspora history of Afro-Surinamese people is preserved musically, linguistically, and spiritually.

Through the harmonious symbiosis of:

- West African pentatonicism and antiphony,
- Islamic-lexical relicts from Mande and Hausa trade routes,

- Christian psalm liturgy and saint veneration,
- Morpho-phonologically elevated Sranan song structures,

the Soko psalm provides a sacred space wherein historical trauma is transformed into spiritual resilience. As the closing pillar of Banya culture and the core of ancestor veneration (*kabra prey*), the Soko psalm remains the ultimate vehicle for consolation, reconciliation, and continuous dialogue between the living and the *gran-afo*.

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