

The Aesthetics of African Music: Indigenous Instruments, Rhythmic Structures and Performance Practices across Africa

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Abstract: *People love African music for its rhythmic power, instrumental hues and group energy. However, these attributes for which it is loved can be misinterpreted as cultural logics. In this opinion piece, it is argued that one should not apply the concepts of autonomous sound, written composition and that of a passive listener to African musical aesthetics but rather, embrace the concepts of relation, embodiment and socially useful music. Three claims are developed in the article. The first claim is that native instruments are not just instruments that produce sound, but material archives of language, memory, craftsmanship, spirituality and social authority. Secondly, the rhythmic devices of polyrhythm, ostinato, syncopation and micro-timing and call-and-response are also forms of social intelligence, which coordinate difference without uniformity. Thirdly, participation in the experience of music and dance is important in determining aesthetic value, as the experience of African performance is co-created with the musicians, dancers, audiences, spaces, costumes and occasions. The article however, challenges the idea of a 'Music of Africa' and provides a regional, historical and gendered perspective. It also argues that digitalization, global circulation and hybridization in themselves are not threats as long as communities have the interpretative authority, ownership, and benefit. Preserving sustainable practice must thus go beyond archiving and embrace living transmission via education, apprenticeship, instrument making, performance and community led technological practice. The beauty of African music is not in isolation but in continuity by means of creative change.*

Keywords: African musical aesthetics, Indigenous instruments, African rhythm, embodied performance, cultural identity, musical heritage

INTRODUCTION

The phrase "African Music" implies a unity of the continent, but there are unique musical histories, languages, instruments, systems of belief and performance conventions in Africa. Pooley (2018) cautions against a singular African music, which would be a continuation of the 'colonial'

practice of 'collapsing differences into an imagined essence'. However, to stop using the comparison with the continent altogether would result in the loss of significant relations that have been established through migrational exchange, joint history and related interpretation of performance. An alternative to this, and a more defensible one, is to speak of African musics in the plural and explore principles which are recurrent, but not universal.

This article is unambiguous: African music aesthetics cannot be well understood without connecting it to the social life, as the melody, harmony or formal structure. Beauty is created out of the connection between sound and occasion, performer and community, instrument and language, rhythm and movement, inheritance and innovation. Similarly, Igue (2021) demonstrates that aesthetic judgement is content and context dependent and Battiste (2023) reveals the partial nature of understanding African-derived musical practices with Western sound-centred frameworks. In this sense, music is not a mere embellishment of African experience; it is one of the ways of structuring, recalling and challenging experience (Nnamani, 2019).

Strategies of indigenous instruments, rhythmic organization and embodied performance are discussed. It proposes that instruments are cultural archives, rhythm is social intelligence and performance is communal authorship. Also explored are issues of gender, regional difference, popular transformation and digital technology and preservation. It is not about glorifying tradition. Instead, it is to demonstrate that the beauty of African music can still be seen, that traditions can still be put to the test, that they can be adapted or renewed. This is a view that sees continuity as a “cultural accomplishment”, as opposed to the mechanical reproduction of transmitted forms that are isolated from the social realities of today.

African Musical Beauty Is Relational

The first and foremost error in the talk about the beauty of African music is that it is thought of as contained within the sound itself. This assumption leads analysts to dissect a performance into rhythm, melody, harmony, form and timbre and to compare each with concepts and categories that have been evolved for other musical histories. While this sort of analysis can be helpful, it becomes reductive if it is used to provide background information about the social setting. The occasion, the performers, the audience and the language, the movement and the purpose are not outside the music in many circumstances of Africa. They are a part of the materials that make up its aesthetic power.

Igue (2021) makes a differentiation between what is pleasant and what is considered good by the culture and highlights the link between sensory appeal and social meaning. In their study of the Ogbanigbe Festival, Chukwuma (2024) also found that the music is a means through which belief, dress, communal organization and identity is made public. These studies corroborate a functional understanding of aesthetics; however, functionality should not be confused with not allowing for artistic enjoyment. A show can be both technically challenging and beautiful; and it can be useful. It is its beauty that may result from the way in which artistry activates memory, worships, celebrates, or criticizes or belongs.

African musical aesthetics are also epistemic in nature. According to Kirui et al. (2025), African performance traditions can be defined as systems that hold the history, spirituality and knowledge. This view puts the performer into a different status. The musician is not just one who plays music that has been passed down to him but is an interpreter of social knowledge. Moshugi et al. (2022) reinforce this by focusing the embodied practice as an approach to research and understanding. The knowledge is not just in the texts or the notation. It is in the people's trained hearing, muscular memory, movement, timing and interaction.

The category “African aesthetics” should thus keep its openness and pluralism. Pooley (2018) is correct to dismiss the notion of a continental essence which sees the variety of traditions as the expression of a unique musical personality. It is not as if plurality precludes comparison, requires greater responsibility in comparative analysis. There are certain qualities shared by all, which must be understood to be historically located tendencies, rather than racial or continental laws. Not all African music is communal, rhythmic or functional. It is the way in which these come together in specific communities, the importance that they have for specific communities, and how their importance shifts.

Indigenous Instruments as Material Archives

Majority of music textbooks present indigenous instruments using the organological classification: idiophones, membranophones, chordophones and aerophones. Classification is helpful, but does not really explain why an instrument is important. Not all àgídígbo are of aesthetic importance because they are able to make sound with their vibrating tongues. It is also significant because of the connection between the tone and the rhythm of Yoruba speech, performance style and social communication. Oludare (2024) demonstrates that its sounds are melo-rhythmic patterns which carry speech surrogate meanings unobtainable by simple equating with a western piano. It is a musical intelligence, which is born out of its form, technique and cultural function.

The talking drums say as much, albeit in a more conspicuous manner. They serve communicative purpose and their ability to mimic speech is tracked by Brauer-Benke (2020). A praise name, warning or proverb uttered by a drum reminds one of the fluid nature of the boundary between music and language. The instrumental is not a means to convey meaning; it is a means to create meaning. Similarly, Franich and Ngnemzué (2021) show that the rhythmic organization of African tone-language song can reflect the prominence patterns of the language in music. Such performance consequently brings aesthetic joys that consist of recognition, verbal skill and the skillful transformation of speech into patterned sound.

The history of movement and exchange is also documented in African instruments. Brauer-Benke (2022) in his study of the bowed instrument reveals that instruments from certain African regions can have long histories of contact with the Arab, Asian, European and intra-African contacts. The same can be said of the adieudation of the Teso community of Kenya as reported by Masasabi and Kususiya (2022). Instruments are not 'frozen survivals' nor 'neutral technologies', and a change

to one part of an ensemble can affect the musical colour. They are those cultural forms that are negotiated.

That is why it is not possible to be authentic and stay the same. Part of the kayamba's sustainability is due to the interactions between Mijikenda musicians and the link between traditional practices and contemporary economic opportunities (Kiragu, 2023). Despite reasonable concerns that recording, transcription, formal instruction and electronic dissemination of Zimbabwean mbira traditions may result in loss of natural sound or context, these practices also enhance the traditions. Marimba workshops demonstrate that transmission is not an automatic process, but one that is a result of intentional effort, particularly in times of economic constraints, which hinder teachers and performers from being able to engage with their communities (Maguraushe, 2024).

The instrument also is indelibly linked to the maker. Through specialised craftsmanship, wood, gourds, skins, metals, and fibres, and local acoustic knowledge are combined. Netshivhambe (2024) thus believes that indigenous instruments cannot be maintained by documentation because they are not built, taught and played at schools and universities. In connection with Nguni instruments, Ngoma and Fikelepi-Twani (2024) come to a similar conclusion: effective learning depends on the community experts, their local resources, practical experience and philosophies that drive the creation and use of instruments.

My argument is that indigenous instruments should be considered as a material archive. They carry the language, know-how of migration, ecology, labour, gender relations, ritual authority, and aesthetic judgements. An archive is only alive, however, if it can be activated. All of this is to say that there is a risk of knowledge systems being lost when an instrument is displayed in a museum, but its makers, players and social uses are not maintained.

Rhythm as Social Intelligence

Rhythm is the most often-used term to extol or stereotype African music. The words “highly rhythmic” sounds like praise, but they tend to break down complicated temporal structures into dynamics, tempo or beat. African rhythmic structures can be more precisely interpreted. They are not just embellishments that are put on melody. They organize relationships between performers, dancers, listeners and between language and movement.

Frishkopf (2021) interprets the concept of polyrhythm in West Africa by the Ewe Agbekor tradition which incorporates the four elements of rhythm, melody, poetry, dance and drama. In particular, his analysis is useful in that, he acknowledges the limitations of notation. A score can indicate durations and entries, but it cannot completely capture the knowledge of the body, and the social negotiation of live participation. Independent rhythmic parts in African ensembles, too, have to be understood in the light of their intelligibility, as Sunday-Kanu and Nnodim (2018) contend. To the onlooker, parallel lines might seem like conflicting ones, but they can actually be an orderly setup of interdependence. This will provide a helpful social reading of polyrhythm. Before unity can be born of different parts, they need not be made identical. Every performer in the ensemble has a unique role and responds to and listens to other performers. The idea of rhythmic unity then comes

about by coordinated difference. The idea that African rhythm is a representation of an ideal African society is not being advanced. Instead, it implies that ensemble practice develops socially relevant ways of paying attention, being responsible and responsive.

Syncopation and micro-timing enhances this process. The research of Sioros et al. (2022) demonstrates that it is not enough to randomly position and displace the instrumental parts, but specific placements and interactions between instrumental parts are significant in the production of groove. In a similar vein, Danielsen et al. (2023) show that micro-timing can be approached by a number of different yet complementary analytical models. The studies caution against considering deviation from metrical grid as error. Minor time variations can result in feel, tension and propulsion. Witek et al. (2020) also ran a study in which the participants from Ghana and America were compared, revealing a difference in how rhythmic exposure influenced synchronization and cautioning with regard to cultural stereotypes. Groove is a deep learning and physicality.

Ostinato/Repetition is another term that is often misunderstood. This does not mean that repetition is a sign of lack of artistry. It establishes a stable field, where variation is audible. Rahn (2022) demonstrates the continuity of ostinatos with Black Atlantic traditions, within a framework of genre-specific differences. Kunnuji and Wium (2023) illustrate that the musical organization of West Africa also has subtleties in melodic and cadential treatments; rhythm cannot supersede melody. The varied singing styles are also recognized as a means of identity amongst sub-Saharan traditions as noted by Addaquay (2025).

Contemporary music substantiates the productive nature of indigenous rhythmic thought, and not residual. Forchu (2020) demonstrates the usage of Igbo speech rhythm, polymetre and polyrhythm in hip-hop by Phyno. This is not just a case of adding “traditional beats” to a different style. It is a transposition of local rhythmic logic to a new technological/commercial environment. Thus Seow (2025) is right in his position that education needs to transcend the thin western canon in regard to rhythm; but, one simplification should not be substituted for another in the process of decolonizing the study of rhythm. Students need to be taught specific traditions, contexts and techniques and not an abstract package of “African rhythm”.

Performance as Embodied and Communal Authorship

African music is most intelligible, when it is not considered as an object, but as an event. While a recording can capture the sound, a performance can involve bodies, gestures, costumes, spatial organization and reactions from the audience and moral expectations of an occasion. This embodied dimension is highlighted by Moshugi et al. (2022) and Azaglo et al. (2022) who demonstrated how Ghanaian dances of the present day express their message through gestures which are a blend of the indigenous and contemporary.

Dance is not just a visual performance. It can read rhythm, challenge drummer, link social identity and relate the performer to spiritual or historical significance. Movement, as described by Izu and De Villiers (2023), is referred to as a cultural ledger as indigenous knowledge may not be

documented but recorded through movement. Mabingo (2022) builds on this premise by developing Ubuntu focused dance education, the assessment of which emerges from participation, conversation, support of others, ethical growth and collective ties. Aesthetic competence is thus relational; not only learning to perform a movement, but in a way that is suitable for the other persons.

The audience is also co-author. Clapping, singing, dancing and verbal encouragement are some ways to alter the intensity and direction of an event, through call and response. The study of South African freedom songs by Jolaosho (2019) demonstrates the use of antiphony, rhythm and repetition in organizing protest gatherings and to allow for flexibility of leadership. Beauty and political effectiveness are here linked together. The song is successful because people can enter into it, make it audible, can reshape it and make it audible collectively.

But participation of the community should not be idealized. Communities contain exclusions. In this regard, Adepegba (2025) demonstrates how female drummers in Nigeria defy religious, cultural and institutional codes in spaces that are coded as masculine. Folk songs also challenge the customs relating to marriage and womanhood as Yitah (2025) shows in the context of Kasena women. From these cases it is clear that tradition is not a monolithic voice. Performance can consolidate power, it can also decentralize power.

The body is thus an archive and a location of argument. It contains inherited technique, and can be resistant to inherited restriction. The tension is a fundamental element in the aesthetics of African music. Rather than simply being a re-presentation of the past, it is the way that cultural knowledges are made present, negotiable and emotionally engaging that makes a performance beautiful.

Regional Plurality, Politics and Creative Modernity

There is an unequal visibility about regions and genres which must be taken into account in any continental discussion. Often times, 'African music' is an abbreviated term that refers to a handful of percussion traditions from sub-Saharan Africa, ignoring the North African, urban, religious and popular African traditions. Jones (2025) shows how in Morocco and Sudan, folk music was caught up in processes of Orientalism and Arabization and in postcolonial nationalism. There can be no one-size-fits-all approach to North African music that can simply be seen as an appendix to an otherwise sub-Saharan story. It uncovers what is made national tradition through the influence of archives, state and cultural classification.

Festivals, mobility and creative industries are also a means to develop East and Central African performance. Kasule (2025) observes that the Bayimba International Festival is an essential platform for interregional artistic culture, but also gives impression of the hardships faced by independent artists. These festivals have the potential to increase exposure, and can also do so if they are saleable. Hence, the political economy of performance has an impact on aesthetic survival. Traditions cannot survive without a venue, income or institutional support for practitioners.

Indigenous performance continues to be a way of remembering and remaking public identity in Southern Africa. Udo and Naidu (2025) note that performances in Umlazi Township are multiple sites of memory and contemporaneity. A similar process of appropriating older freedom

material to new struggles is demonstrated in Jolaosho (2019), a protest song. Mdlalose (2026) reads amapiano as a sonic practice that is about "Black survival, aspiration and world making. Such studies question the authenticity that is reserved for village traditions. Township genres can also be "living archives".

The continuity of creativity is just as strong in the case of West African popular music. Coester (2025) demonstrates the way that highlife was involved in transforming colonial structures of feeling prior to independence. Òjó (2023) is an example of how Àpàlà was integrated into the realm of Christian worship without its proverbial language and percussive identity and communicative force being lost. In this context, Forchu (2020) names the Igbo rhythmic guidelines in hip-hop, while Kunnuji and Wium (2023) disclose the formal sophistication of Ogu song. The aesthetics of indigenous systems are not necessarily obliterated by popularization, conversion and technological changes. They develop new spaces where cultural authority is bargained.

Any purely auditory definition of music is further confused by the costumes, visual identity and so on. Seda and Manyeneng (2023) discuss how Sho Madjozi's performance of Tsonga language, costume, dance and rap is a hybrid performance that both maintains and challenges tradition. This hybridity need not be unquestioningly welcomed, nor considered as a form of cultural dilution. Its worth relies on a number of factors including control of the representation; the acknowledgment of source communities; and, whether the transformation extends or eradicates cultural knowledge. Intercultural creativity can be based on Ligeti's (2022) principle: African ideas can be the source of artistic innovation without being taken over as exotic surfaces. It is important that the ethical goal be to give motivated response, not to copy. This is true not only in Africa, but beyond its borders. Traditions have always been in contact with, borrowed from and modified by each other. It is not the problem of 'mixture' per se, but of unequal power and shallow extraction and the appropriation of musical concepts from the communities in which they grew.

From Preservation to Living Continuity

Preserving African music is often thought of as a rescue mission for endangered traditions. Such a language may endear communities to, but also endangers them as the passive custodians of a vanishing past. Agency is the first step to a better model. Gwervevande and Mthombeni (2023) stress the need for the protection of music, dance and language in community-based approaches. Tang and Wu (2025) also call for a shift from maintaining a static preservation to living, plural and interdisciplinary heritage systems.

Archiving continues to play a role, but is not the only tool needed. Through the example of IsiXhosa recordings, Madiba (2021) reveals the significance of a repatriation that can elicit engagement from communities and by contemporary musicians. A sound file without creative control can re-recapitulate the power of the archive. Not only is it a question of access to the past, but it is also a question of the right to reinterpret the past.

Education is also determining. The need of the hour is sustainable decolonization of the musical arts education in Africa as called for by McConnachie (2026), and the importance of community

experts and practical instruction in higher education as demonstrated by Ngoma and Fikelepi-Twani (2024). Netshivhambe (2024) states that it is important to include indigenous instruments in to teaching and performance. The proposals involve more than just one of the courses, “African music”, in an otherwise untouched curriculum. Institutions need to foster the buying of instruments, concepts using a local language, ensemble working, apprenticeship and the authority of the culture bearers.

Technology can be a blessing and a curse. Through their research, Matiure and Muranda (2024) demonstrate that the use of digital recording and transcription can capture mbira knowledge, yet it can also impact on the sonority and expectations for playing these instruments. The worry is expanded to artificial intelligence (AI), data sovereignty and algorithmic bias by Kirui et al. (2025). Historical extractive dynamics can be replicated in a digital archive trained or controlled elsewhere. Thus, the principles of community consent, co-design, attribution and benefit-sharing need to be central aesthetic and ethical principles.

Economic sustainability cannot be regarded as contamination. Based on Kiragu (2023), it can be observed that the kayamba is a product of the indigenous practice and modern trade. Maguraushe (2024) shows how workshops can help marimba performance to exist in the absence of formal structures. It is not a question of purism and rotten markets. The actual challenge is to establish markets, institutions and technologies which enable musicians and producers to reap benefits while retaining cultural control.

Implications of the Study

This research has implications for music scholarship, education, cultural policy, performance practice, heritage preservation and technological development in Africa. The main point is that African music should not be analyzed as a mere combination of sounds. Its meaning is located in the interaction between instruments, rhythm, movement, words, spirit, social inclusion and cultural memory. Apart from these relationships, the analysis of African music is likely to yield an incomplete or culturally distorted interpretation.

Implications for African Music Scholarship

The study asks scholars to transcend the general statements about African music: communal, rhythmic, or traditional. While these characteristics are significant, they also tend to turn into clichés when used across the continent without any nuance. There are a variety of musical systems that have evolved across Africa, depending on the linguistics, history, religion and politics of the area. Scholars, therefore, need to be aware of both the commonalities and the regional variations.

The idea is that culturally based ideas should be employed in future research on African music. Harmony, metre, composition and notation are still useful terms in the west, but are not necessarily the only meaningful categories for analysis. The addition of indigenous concepts of timing, participation, speech rhythm, movement and responsibility in performance to musical analysis would help in the creation of an equitable and de-colonialized perspective on African music (Moshugi et al., 2022; Pooley, 2018).

The study additionally proposes that embodied knowledge ought to be acknowledged as a legitimate type of scholarship. Learning of music is frequently through listening, imitating, moving, repeating and participating. Researchers are therefore encouraged to supplement textual analysis with observation, practical performance, interviews and collaboration with musicians, dancers and instrument makers.

Implications for Music Education

The results are directly relevant to education of music in Africa. Cultural additions of indigenous instruments and rhythmic systems should not be the occasional non-western music components in curricula dominated by western music. They should be a key component to music education in primary, secondary and tertiary education.

Students should learn to perform indigenous instruments, read rhythmic sequences, and to join in with others in music performances and understand the circumstances of music making. There should be a balance between practical learning and historical, theoretical and cultural learning. This would enable students to come to understand that indigenous music is a sophisticated knowledge system, and not an informal or inferior form of musical expression.

Involving traditional musicians and instrument makers in teaching should also be done in music institutions. The community experts have knowledge that can be outside of the textbook and/or formal notation. The collaboration between universities and local practitioners would bridge the gap between the academic music education and living musical traditions (Ngoma & Fikelepi-Twani, 2024; Netshivhambe, 2024).

The study also suggests that there should be African performance values in the assessment methods. In assessing students, do not focus solely on technical accuracy of the individual student. The assessment shall also take into account listening, cooperation, improvisation, cultural understanding and the ability to react in an appropriate manner ensemble. Ubuntu-based assessment offers a helpful framework as it sees learning as relational and communal (Mabingo, 2022).

Implications for Cultural Policy and Heritage Management

The study shows that cultural preservation should not be limited to the collection of instruments and recordings. The knowledge of how to build, tune and play an instrument was not protected, so preserving the instrument itself is only part of the solution. Cultural policies should thus promote instrument makers, master performers, community ensembles, festivals and apprenticeship programmes.

There is need for financial support from government to indigenous musicians and cultural institutions, provide performance spaces and finance training of interested/qualified individuals. There should be a record of traditions with the communities who own and practice them. Community members should be involved in decisions about what information is recorded, how it is stored and who can access it.

The music, dance, language and ritual should be considered as interpenetrating practices in heritage programmes. The dissociation of them can help to maintain their distinct parts but reduce the meaning system that supports them culturally. Hence, community-led preservation is more sustainable than the ones that are only under the control of external institutions (Gwerevende& Mthombeni, 2023).

Implications for Contemporary Musicians and Performance Practice

The study does not imply that African musicians should refrain from experimentation, popular music or collaboration with groups abroad. Instead, it suggests that innovation should be based on culture. Today's players are able to merge the sounds of native instruments and rhythm concepts with popular and orchestral sounds and electronics, but not always at the cost of tradition.

Musicians should not draw upon the indigenous musical elements solely as symbols of Africanness. Adaptations should be meaningful, meaning you need to know where things came from, what they do and why they are important in the culture. Local communities where the source is and traditional performers should also be appropriately recognized and remunerated.

The research also emphasizes the importance of encouraging women and other marginalized groups to perform on specific instruments and/or spaces. Permanent inequality cannot be based on tradition. This growing involvement of female drummers is an indicator that cultural continuity and social change can coexist (Adepegba, 2025).

Implications for Digital Technology

The use of digital technology offers valuable tools for documentation, instruction and dissemination of African music. Endangered traditions can be made available to younger generations and larger audiences through online archives, virtual lessons and digital platforms. Technology can also provide assistance in the documentation of instrument making techniques and oral histories and regional performance styles.

However, cultural authority, consent and ownership are important issues in digital preservation. Musical material might include sacred music, music which is restricted or inappropriate for unrestricted dissemination on the Internet. Communities should therefore identify how the musical knowledge is to be digitized and shared.

Artificial Intelligence and digital sampling also pose questions of attribution and exploitation. Commercial systems should not be trained using African musical materials without the knowledge and benefit of the owners of the culture. Community consent, proper acknowledgement, data protection and fair benefit-sharing should be part and parcel of ethical technological practice (Kirui et al., 2025).

Implications for Future Research

In future, individual music traditions should be studied further, and not just through the main medium of continental generalizations. Comparative studies can investigate the ways in which other African communities structure rhythm, movement, improvisation and interaction with the audience.

Additional research is also required with instrument makers, female musicians, community music teachers and young musicians. Studies on indigenous instrument productions, effects of migration, urbanization, climate change and material scarcity should be conducted.

Studies that assess the success of digital preservation, apprenticeship programs and curriculum changes are also needed.

Conclusion

Attractive sounds, complex rhythms and colourful instrumentation are not solely the aesthetics of African music. It is a beauty that is about relationships. It surfaces when instruments bring language and memory to the fore, when rhythmic players ensure different roles are played, and when bodies, audiences and spaces provide a window to the shared experience of sound. This does not imply that this is not a formal musical analysis, rather that form is located within the cultural relations making it meaningful.

Three conclusions follow. Firstly, indigenous instruments need to be considered as material archives that depend not only on museums for their survival, but also on the makers, players and community. Secondly, African rhythms must be examined as a system of time rather than as an expression of undefined "African instinct" and their execution as social action. Thirdly, performance is a space of 'community' where tradition may be affirmed, criticized and changed. Preserving African musical heritage for the future will not be accomplished by freezing it. It will rely on live transmission, good technology, just economics, effective education and community control. African musical beauty has remained intact throughout the years because it could remember (without being immobile) and innovate (without being culturally empty). Thus its deepest aesthetic success, contrary to sameness across the continent, is not the ability to compose difference but to create ways of life that are meaningful, participative and ongoing.

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