

# HOLISTIC NATURE OF AFRICAN MUSIC AND ITS ROLE IN EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Journals of Arts &amp; Humanities Studies

ISSN: 3069-325X (Online)

Vol. 1: Issue 3

Page 38–44 © The Author(s) 2025

Received: 05 July 2025

Accepted: 17 July 2025

Published: 31 July 2025



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## ABSTRACT

Among the diverse cultural traditions of Africa, music serves as an effective repository of indigenous knowledge systems, collective memory, and social philosophy. Far beyond its aesthetic function as entertainment or sonic expression, African music operates as an integrated cultural phenomenon, embodying cosmological, historical, social, and ethical dimensions central to the lived experiences and worldviews of its communities. It is deeply linked with ritual, spirituality, dance, oral tradition, and communal organisation, thereby functioning as a holistic art form that sustains and transmits cultural values across generations. This paper critically engages the perspectives of leading scholars including J.H. Kwabena Nketia (1974), Kwadzo Avorgbedor (2001), Kofi Agawu (1995), Modesto Amegago (2011), Kofi Gbolonyo (2009), and Sylvanus Kwashie Kuwor (2013), whose work illuminates the multi-layered nature of African music. Collectively, their scholarship challenges reductionist understandings of music as an autonomous or purely aesthetic category, demonstrating instead its role as a dynamic vehicle of cultural performance, identity formation, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Building on these foundational insights, the paper argues for a reconceptualisation of African music as a multidimensional cultural practice that transcends auditory boundaries and synthesises sound, movement, language, visual forms, and spirituality. Such a framework foregrounds music's epistemic and pedagogical functions, positioning it as a critical medium through which communities articulate historical consciousness, preserve ethical principles, and negotiate cultural continuity in the face of social change. The paper situates African music within an interdisciplinary discourse spanning performance studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, and cultural philosophy to contributing to broader scholarly debates on embodiment, decoloniality, and the epistemic significance of indigenous art forms. Ultimately, it underscores the indispensability of African music as a dynamic system of knowledge, a catalyst for cultural resilience, and a cornerstone of identity and self-definition in both local and diasporic contexts

**KEY WORDS** - African Music, Holistic Art Form, Identity Construction, Cultural Representation, Decoloniality

## Introduction

Within the diverse cultural landscapes of Africa, music functions as a fundamental repository of indigenous knowledge systems and collective memory. Far beyond serving as a form of entertainment or mere sonic art, music in African traditions embodies cosmological, historical, social, and philosophical dimensions that are integral to the lived experiences and worldviews of various communities. Scholars such as J.H. Kwabena Nketia (1974), Modesto Amegago (2011), Kwadzo Avorgbedor (2001), Kofi Agawu (1995), Kofi Gbolonyo (2009), and Sylvanus Kwashie Kuwor (2013) have extensively examined the multi-layered nature of African music, offering critical insights into its role as a holistic art form that synthesises sound, movement, ritual, and social communication.

These scholarly contributions affirm that African music is not an isolated aesthetic phenomenon but is deeply embedded in cultural performance, identity formation, oral tradition, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. This paper draws on these foundational perspectives to argue for a reconceptualisation of music in Africa as an integrated art form that intersects with dance, language, spirituality, visual forms and social organisation. By engaging with the work of these key scholars, the study foregrounds the importance of treating African music as a dynamic cultural expression that transcends auditory boundaries and serves as a vehicle for sustaining and transmitting cultural knowledge, values, ethical principles, and historical consciousness.

Drawing on the deep-rooted philosophy and scholarly insights of revered ancestors such as Kwame Nkrumah, Mawere Opoku, Kwabena Nketiah, and Akin Euba, I embrace a holistic definition of music within a transdisciplinary framework. In this context, music is not merely a form of entertainment or art but is understood as a complex and unique phenomenon that transcends boundaries, integrating sound, rhythm, vibration, and movement to communicate the collective knowledge and life experiences of a people.

Music, in its most significant sense, serves as a dynamic conduit for conveying the essence of cultural knowledge, values and virtues. It encompasses an expansive range of elements, including language, symbolism, philosophy, spirituality, religion, belief systems, cosmology, cosmogony, science, technology, customs, and institutions. Each of these components is intertwined, with music becoming the thread that connects the present to the past, the material to the spiritual, and the individual to the community.

Through this holistic lens, I consider African music as more than artistic or performative expression. It functions as a repository of cultural identity and collective memory, carrying within it the stories, struggles, triumphs, and wisdom of generations. I see its rhythms echoing ancestral traditions, its melodies encoding philosophical truths, its song texts presenting historical narratives, its movements and gestures communicating symbolic messages and its vibrations foster a sense of spiritual connection that resonates deeply within the African diasporan experience. Music, thus, becomes not only a celebration of life but also a powerful tool for cultural preservation and transmission, sustaining the core values and heritage of people across time and space.

### **Understanding the Concept of Music in an African Perspective**

In African traditions, the understanding of music transcends the limitations often imposed by Western definitions. Unlike the Western conceptualization, where music is typically viewed as a distinct and isolated activity, African music exists as an integrated and dynamic part of communal life. It is not merely a sonic experience but rather a rich, multilayered expression that encompasses sound, movement, emotion, and cultural identity. African music emerges from a deep cultural and social framework where it is interwoven with rituals, ceremonies, and the day-to-day experiences of the people. Music is a living, breathing entity, inseparable from the community's spiritual and social practices. This is why, across the diverse African languages and cultures, there is no single term that neatly captures the essence of music in the Western sense. Instead, the concept of music in Africa incorporates a spectrum of interconnected activities including drumming, singing, dancing, storytelling and dramatic enactment all of which come together to form a cohesive and holistic expression of shared life and collective identity of a people.

In the Anlo-Ewe tradition, for example, the word *wu* serves as a prime illustration of what the people believe and practice as music. The word does not merely refer to music as an auditory phenomenon but embodies an entire performance that integrates singing, drumming, dancing, storytelling and the use of visual forms in semiotic communication. These elements are seen as inseparable, all contributing equally to the creation of *wu*. The drum, also referred to as *wu*, is central to the performance, symbolizing the fundamental role that rhythm and percussion play in the various African musical traditions. This holistic understanding of music as a collective experience highlights the significant role each element plays in building the full expression of African musical culture. The artificial separation of these components, as often done in Western music studies, is not just unfamiliar but incompatible with the African worldview, where music cannot be detached from its accompanying movements, gestures, and communal participation.

Historically, this holistic nature of African music was not fully respected or understood in early research conducted by Western scholars. Pioneers of African music scholarship such as A.M. Jones (1959),

J.H. Kwabena Nketia (1974), Bebey (1975), David Locke (1978), and John Miller Chernoff (1979), although instrumental in documenting African music, approached their studies from a Western ethnomusicological framework. Their research primarily focused on isolating musical elements such as melody, rhythm, instrumentation and song text from the broader performance context, often overlooking or underemphasizing the equally important role of dance, movement, and social function. A.M. Jones's *Studies in African Music* (1959), which became one of the most well-known texts in the field, exemplifies this trend. While groundbreaking for its time, the work nonetheless reinforced the Western preference for analyzing music in isolation from other cultural elements, resulting in a fragmented understanding of African musical traditions. These early scholars focused largely on sound, tones, rhythms, and harmonies while missing the crucial interplay between these sounds and the physical movements of dance, the spiritual and communal dynamics, and the cultural symbolism embedded in the performances.

Even though some scholars, such as Mawere Opoku, who was instrumental in the institutionalisation of dance in Ghana, recognised the deep connection between music and dance, the broader scholarly community failed to grasp the importance of this relationship. Opoku's (1965) definition of dance includes music and other related arts creating the holistic nature of what could be termed as African performance making. The tendency to view music as an isolated art form, divorced from its physical and cultural context, led to a vast body of academic work that did not fully represent the richness of African musical traditions. The focus on studying the "musical" components without acknowledging the integral role of dance movements, gestures, and the socio-cultural environment, created an incomplete and often misleading narrative about African music. This resulted in the underrepresentation of key aspects of African performance art and a misunderstanding of the full scope of what music means within African societies. More recent scholarship, particularly by African scholars or those with close ties to African cultures, has begun to challenge and redress these earlier limitations. Researchers such as Kofi Agawu (2003), Kwadzo Avorgbedor (2001), Paschal Younge (2011), Modesto Amegago (2011), Kofi Gbolonyo (2009), Iddrisu (2011), Elikem Nyamuame (2013) and Sylvanus Kwashie Kuwor (2013) have worked to bridge the gap between the study of African music and its intrinsic connection to dance, language, and cultural identity. These scholars emphasise that any study of African music that fails to account for its integration with dance and the social practices surrounding it is incomplete. They argue for a broader, more inclusive understanding of African music in a context that recognises its role not only as an auditory art form but also as a physical, emotional, and cultural experience. This shift in perspective underscores the importance of studying African music in its entirety thereby embracing its connections to dance, ritual, social functions, and the community's worldview.

In essence, the work of these scholars highlights that African music is not merely about sound production; it is about the totality of the experience. The singing, drumming, dancing, and the communal context within which these activities occur all contribute to what music truly means in African societies. By reclaiming the holistic nature of African music, modern scholars aim to present a fuller, more authentic representation of the traditions and cultural expressions that have been shaped by centuries of practice and belief. African music, in this sense, is an embodiment of cultural identity, spirituality, and community as a living tradition that cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the deep interconnections between its various components.

### **The Multifunctional Role of African Music**

One of the central themes that scholars and practitioners must emphasise is the multifunctional role of African music, which extends far beyond the realm of entertainment. In African societies, music is not merely a source of amusement or enjoyment, but a powerful medium that fulfills a wide array of societal functions. Music is a vehicle for education, cultural preservation, and social commentary, providing a dynamic platform through which communities express their histories, beliefs, and values. This integration of music into the daily fabric of life reflects its deeply embedded role in rituals, ceremonies, and even the most routine activities of African societies.

African music serves as a key tool for education, passing on essential knowledge through its rhythms, melodies, and lyrics. Oral traditions are central to African cultures, and songs become repositories of wisdom, moral teachings, and historical narratives. Through music, the collective memory of a community is preserved, with stories of past events, genealogies, and cultural practices being passed down through generations. This makes music a living archive, ensuring that cultural knowledge is not lost but continually

transmitted. In this way, music operates as an audible form of historical documentation, recording not just facts but the emotional, social, and spiritual significance of events and traditions.

The role of African music as a means of cultural preservation cannot be overstated. As societies evolve and external influences make their way into communities, music remains a grounding force, a constant reminder of the values and traditions that have shaped a people. It is through music that many African societies maintain their cultural distinctiveness and continuity in the face of change. Whether in the form of songs that accompany religious rituals, or the music played during rites of passage, the cultural significance of music permeates every aspect of life, reinforcing the identity and shared experiences of the community.

Beyond its role in education and preservation, music in Africa also acts as a potent form of social commentary. For both performers and audiences, music provides a platform for expressing views on societal issues, whether in the form of praise, protest, or critique. Songs often address matters of social justice, governance, and community values, serving as a voice for the voiceless and a means of challenging authority or societal norms. In times of political struggle or social upheaval, music becomes a rallying cry for change, offering a way to mobilize and unite people in collective action. On the other hand, it can also serve as a means of celebrating and reinforcing positive social values, offering praise to individuals or institutions that embody the ideals of the community.

The capacity of African music to entertain and provide pleasure is well recognized, but even in its entertaining function, it often serves deeper purposes. While music offers joy and emotional release, it simultaneously provides a space for cultural display, where performers showcase the creative and aesthetic elements of their tradition. This dual role of music—delivering both entertainment and cultural expression—illustrates its versatility. It provokes thought, engages the senses, and offers an outlet for creativity, while maintaining its grounding in the social and cultural realities of the community. Additionally, music in African societies functions as a tool for social support. It can provide a sense of empowerment and belongingness for both individuals and groups. Music accompanies important life events, such as weddings, funerals, and initiation ceremonies, helping to mark these occasions with meaning and emotional depth. In communal settings, music fosters unity and solidarity, creating bonds that transcend the individual and reinforce the collective identity. Whether in times of joy or sorrow, African music offers emotional support, facilitating healing, connection, and understanding within the community.

At the same time, music in Africa often acts as a means of protest and provocation. Through music, individuals and groups can voice dissatisfaction with societal conditions, challenge injustices, and call for change. This function of music as a form of resistance highlights its capacity to act as a catalyst for social transformation. Protest songs, for instance, have been integral to movements for political freedom and human rights across the African continent, using rhythm and lyrics to inspire action and promote a vision of a better future.

In its various roles, African music is deeply intertwined with the expression of aesthetic values. The creative processes involved in making music, from composing to performing, are opportunities for artistic expression that reflect the community's tastes, standards of beauty, and cultural ideals. Whether through the intricate patterns of drumming, the harmonies of vocal arrangements, or the vibrancy of dance movements, African music celebrates creativity, skill, and artistry, contributing to the community's overall sense of cultural pride and identity.

Ultimately, African music stands as a multifaceted institution that encompasses education, empowerment, criticism, pleasure, and historical documentation. It is a living tradition that not only entertains but also preserves the cultural heritage of a people, records their history, and engages them in social and political discourse. Through its ability to function on multiple levels, music in Africa remains a vital force in shaping and sustaining the identities, beliefs, and values of its communities.

### **African Music and the Issue of Representation: Expanding the Discourse**

In the exploration of African music and related art forms, both within indigenous settings and in the broader international arena, the subject of representation becomes essential. The role of music in fostering cultural reunions, especially for African diasporan communities, is significant. However, the manner in which

African music is represented, both on the national and global stages, raises questions about authenticity, generalization, and the diversity of cultural identities.

In many African local settings, music is deeply embedded in the centrality of daily life. It is not merely an art form but a lived experience, inseparable from the cultural, social, and spiritual practices of the people. Music, alongside dance, plays a pivotal role in rituals, festivals, and communal gatherings. It carries meaning, tells stories, and preserves histories. Yet, when African music is taken from its native context and presented on national stages in urban centers or in diaspora communities, it often becomes a representation of an entire people or, worse, a generalized portrayal of "African culture."

This reduction of diverse cultural expressions into a singular "African" identity poses challenges. The nuances of individual African cultures can get lost in the attempt to represent them on national or international stages, where the focus is often on entertainment rather than authenticity. As African music travels globally, its visibility increases, but so do the risks of misrepresentation. How then can we ensure that the representation of African music and dance remains faithful to its origins while also being accessible to broader audiences?

### **Theoretical Frameworks on Representation**

To address the issue of representation, various scholars provide critical insights into how culture is expressed and interpreted through music, dance, and performance. Anthony Shay's work on state-sponsored folk-dance companies (2002) serves as an essential framework for understanding the politics behind cultural representation in both national and international settings. Shay's interdisciplinary approach, blending cultural studies with sociology and anthropology, allows him to explore how national dance companies use choreographic strategies and artistic direction to create a narrative of identity. These companies are not neutral entities but are situated within specific political, social, gendered, and national contexts. Shay's analysis reveals how the state can manipulate music and dance as a political tool to promote a curated image of the nation, showcasing particular aspects of its culture that align with state interests or ideologies.

Shay's concept of representation as a tool of power resonates in both dance and music. Representation, in this sense, is not merely about showing or performing cultural elements but about who has the authority to define and describe that culture. When state-sponsored dance companies or even diaspora performances present the music and dance of specific African groups, they do not do so in a vacuum. Instead, these performances are often subject to power dynamics, where state entities, directors, or choreographers decide which cultural elements to highlight or omit. This selective representation frequently aligns with nationalistic objectives, emphasizing what the state wants to project to both domestic and international audiences. In some cases, the purpose may also be touristic, designed to appeal to foreign audiences' preconceived notions of "authentic" African culture. By choosing specific rhythms, movements, or costumes, those in control shape the narrative of what it means to be African, creating a simplified or idealized version of reality.

Similarly, Kofi Agawu's scholarship on African music offers an indispensable critique of how African musical traditions have been represented, particularly in ethnographic research. Agawu (2003) argues that external portrayals of African music are often fraught with ethical concerns, assumptions, and biases. In his earlier work (1995), Agawu meticulously examines the rhythms of northern Ewe music, drawing attention to the deep interconnections between rhythm, language, and the everyday experiences of the people. He highlights how African music, especially in Western academic and ethnographic settings, is often reduced to its rhythmic elements, perpetuating a stereotype that African music is primarily rhythmic, devoid of the complexity of melody, harmony, and other musical dimensions. This kind of reductive representation not only diminishes the full artistic richness of African music but also perpetuates exoticized, one-dimensional portrayals of African cultures.

Agawu's critique extends beyond rhythm to the broader issue of how African music has been framed by outsiders. His emphasis on contextualizing African music within its socio-cultural framework points to the importance of understanding music not just as an isolated art form but as an integrated part of the broader cultural and social fabric. African music, with its dance, is deeply connected with language, community rituals, historical events, and spiritual practices. By isolating its elements or misrepresenting its function,

outside researchers and performers risk distorting its true meaning and significance. Agawu thus calls for a more holistic, integrated approach to representation, one that includes not only the rhythmic aspects of music but also its relationships to other cultural elements, such as singing, dancing, storytelling, and communal activities.

This approach aligns closely with Stuart Hall's theories on cultural representation. Hall (1997) contends that within any culture, there exists a vast array of meanings and interpretations of cultural practices. No single representation can capture the entirety of a culture or its significance. Instead, Hall argues that multiple layers of meaning are always present, and any act of representation is inherently selective, shaped by the context in which it is produced and the perspective of the person or entity doing the representation. This plurality of meaning is especially relevant when considering the diversity of African musical traditions. Even within a single ethnic group, there can be multiple ways of understanding a particular song or movement pattern, depending on the occasion, the audience, or the performers themselves.

Applying Hall's ideas to the representation of African music means acknowledging that no single performance or academic study can fully encapsulate the richness of these traditions. Instead, what is presented or studied is always a partial view, influenced by the priorities and biases of those in control of the representation. Whether it is a state-sponsored troupe performing on a national stage or an academic researcher writing about traditional music, the representation is a product of both the internal dynamics of the culture being represented and the external forces shaping how that culture is portrayed.

The combined works of Shay, Agawu, and Hall thus offer a holistic understanding of representation, especially in the context of African music and dance. I hasten to add that, representation is not neutral, it is inherently tied to power structures, selective interpretations, and cultural gatekeeping. Ensuring that African music and dance are represented accurately and respectfully requires an awareness of these dynamics and a commitment to engaging with the full complexity of these traditions, rather than reducing them to simplified or stereotyped forms for external consumption.

### **Representation of African Movements**

The question of representation also extends to African drum language and dance movements, where meaning is deeply rooted in the cultural context. Kinesthetic expression in Africa is not monolithic—movements that may appear similar across different groups can have vastly different meanings depending on the culture. For example, a dance movement in one community may symbolize joy or celebration, while the same movement in another culture might signify mourning or respect for the ancestors. This underscores the importance of cultural specificity in the representation of African music and dance.

In representing African music and dance on global stages, there is a tendency to generalize African culture, reducing the multiplicity of African identities into a singular "African" experience. This can result in the flattening of cultural differences, as well as the misinterpretation of cultural practices. For instance, African dances are often showcased in international festivals or diasporan communities as "African dance," without reference to the specific ethnic group or region from which the dance originates. The same issue arises with African music, which can be labelled as "African music" without acknowledging the vast diversity of musical styles, instruments, and traditions across the continent.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation provides insight into this issue. He argues that representation is not merely a reflection of reality but a way of constructing meaning. In the case of African music and dance, the way in which these cultural forms are represented on national or global stages shapes how they are perceived and understood. Hall's assertion that there is always a diversity of meanings within any culture (1997) is crucial for understanding African music and dance. There is no single "African music" or "African dance"; rather, there are countless musical and dance traditions, each with its own unique meanings and cultural significance.

### **Conclusion**

Educating an individual, a community, or an entire nation is fundamentally a process of knowledge transmission and cultural reproduction. Education is not merely the mechanical transfer of information but involves the shaping of identities, values, and worldviews that collectively define a people's approach to life

and their relationship with their environment. For the African, education cannot be complete without exploration of music and dance with their related art forms coming together as a holistic process. Given that every geo-physical region is marked by distinct historical trajectories, social structures, ecological realities, and philosophical orientations, it is imperative that any educational process intended to address human and environmental challenges be firmly grounded in the indigenous cultural values and epistemologies of the specific community in question.

This paper contends that within the African context, any educational framework that seeks to be truly holistic and transformative must necessarily incorporate music and dance as core components. Music and dance, far from being peripheral or merely recreational activities, constitute vital repositories of indigenous knowledge systems. They embody complex philosophical ideas, ethical norms, cosmological understandings, and social practices that have historically sustained African societies. These art forms function as dynamic archives through which collective memory, environmental wisdom, and social cohesion are transmitted intergenerationally.

The argument advanced here suggests that the widespread socio-economic stagnation and cultural disintegration observed across many African communities can, to a considerable extent, be attributed to the systematic alienation of people from their indigenous cultural expressions, notably music and dance. The imposition of colonial and Eurocentric educational models has often marginalized these art forms, relegating them to the realm of entertainment rather than recognising them as central to intellectual and moral development.

Consequently, the erosion of these indigenous practices has led not only to the loss of cultural capital but also to a diminished capacity to address contemporary challenges in ways that resonate with local realities and values. This paper concludes that a deliberate reintegration of music and dance into educational curricula and community life offers a viable pathway toward cultural revitalisation and socio-economic renewal. By reclaiming and valourising these indigenous knowledge systems, African societies can foster greater self-awareness, resilience, and innovation, thereby reversing current trajectories of economic stagnation and cultural alienation.

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