

African Musical Systems: Epistemic Foundations and Aesthetic Trajectories

Albert O. U. Authority, PhD²

Department of Music, Faculty of Humanities,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education,
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

dr.albert.oau@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0002-9433-3801

Web of Science Researcher ID: OOM-9035-2025

Blessing Ebere Arihi

Department of Music, Faculty of Arts.
University of Calabar, Calabar
Cross Rivers State, Nigeria

chizbless001@gmail.com

ORCHID ID: 0009-0007-4649-2476

Abstract

The study addressed the lack of analytical models capable of comparing African musical systems without collapsing their epistemic distinctiveness, a gap that has limited theoretical coherence in African music scholarship. It examined this problem by developing an epistemic–aesthetic analytical framework and applying it to two contrasting case studies using a qualitative comparative design, drawing on two data sources and analysing two musical systems through six analytical categories. The analysis identified three core patterns: a shared relational macro-epistemology across systems, distinct authorship and transmission logics, and convergences in rhythmic and textural organisation despite divergent performance ecologies. It also found that four of the six analytical categories revealed cross-system continuities, while two highlighted structural divergence. These findings demonstrated that African musical systems can be compared rigorously without imposing external categories. The study’s significance lies in offering a theoretically grounded, methodologically replicable model that advances African music analysis and supports future research, pedagogy, and creative practice.

Keywords: Aesthetic Trajectories, African Musical Thought, Comparative Analysis, Epistemic Foundations, Musical Systems

Introduction

African musical scholarship occupies a distinctive yet unsettled place in global musicology. Scholars have long recognised that African musical practices embody sophisticated systems of knowledge, aesthetics, and social philosophy that extend beyond performance (Nketia, 1974; Nzewi, 1997; Agawu, 2016). As cultural archives, they transmit cosmology, ethics, identity, and collective memory. Yet the conceptual vocabulary used to describe these practices remains imprecise. Terms such as African Music, African Traditional Music, and African Art Music circulate widely, but their meanings often overlap, producing analytical ambiguity that obscures the epistemic identities of these systems and limits theoretical precision.

Existing scholarship offers valuable but siloed insights. African Traditional Music is documented as an indigenous, communal, embodied knowledge system rooted in ritual and social cohesion (Nzewi, 1997; Chernoff, 1979). African Art Music is theorised as a modern, hybrid tradition shaped by composers who recontextualised indigenous principles within literate frameworks (Omojola, 1995; Euba, 1989). African Music, as a macro category, is treated as a civilisational field encompassing diverse sonic cultures (Nketia, 1974). While these studies deepen understanding within each domain, they rarely engage comparatively. The field lacks an epistemic and aesthetic analysis capable of explaining how these systems relate, diverge, or inform one another. This absence is consequential: without a comparative framework, scholarship risks reinforcing the homogenising tendencies long critiqued in Western representations of African culture (Agawu, 2003; Nzegwu, 2010) and limiting the articulation of African musical thought as a coherent intellectual tradition.

This tension creates a conceptual impasse. Although African musical systems are widely acknowledged as intellectually robust, the absence of a unified analytical model allows conceptual conflation to persist, flattening distinct ontologies, knowledge structures, and aesthetic trajectories. The problem extends beyond terminology, shaping pedagogy, historiography, curriculum design, and global representations of African musical knowledge. Treating African Music, African Traditional Music, and African Art Music as interchangeable obscures their epistemic logics and under theorises their contributions to African intellectual history. A comparative approach is therefore necessary to illuminate both continuities and divergences across these systems.

This study responds by theorising African musical systems through a comparative epistemic and aesthetic lens. It asks four questions: What epistemic foundations underpin African Music, African Traditional Music, and African Art Music? What aesthetic trajectories characterise each system? How do these systems converge, diverge, and inform one another? And what conceptual framework can unify their analysis? Addressing these questions moves beyond descriptive accounts toward a deeper theorisation of African musical thought as interconnected yet distinct epistemic formations. The comparative approach reveals relationships invisible when systems are examined in isolation and provides the analytical precision needed to articulate African musical knowledge as a structured, multilayered intellectual tradition.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its potential to clarify conceptual categories long treated as interchangeable. By introducing a comparative epistemic–aesthetic model, the study advances African musicology in three ways. It offers a theoretical vocabulary that distinguishes internal logics without severing cultural continuities; contributes to decolonial scholarship by foregrounding African epistemologies and challenging inherited classificatory frameworks (Mignolo, 2011; Maldonado-Torres, 2007); and supports curriculum reform by framing African musical systems as knowledge structures rather than cultural artefacts. These contributions prepare the ground for a unified model of African musical systems grounded in African Musical Thought.

By reframing African Music, African Traditional Music, and African Art Music as epistemic systems with distinct aesthetic trajectories, the study opens a pathway toward a more coherent and theoretically grounded African musicology. It invites scholars to interrogate conceptual boundaries and engage African musical thought as a dynamic field whose internal relationships remain insufficiently theorised. The analysis that follows builds toward a conceptual synthesis that repositions African musical systems within global musicology while affirming their intellectual sovereignty.

Conceptual Clarification and Literature Positioning

African Music operates as a macro system encompassing the continent’s diverse sonic cultures, intellectual traditions, and aesthetic practices. Its evolution in global musicology reflects both scholarly interest and persistent misunderstanding. Early ethnomusicology often treated African music as a monolithic field defined by rhythmic complexity and communal function (Nketia, 1974). African scholars later challenged this homogenisation, emphasising plurality and the need to theorise musical systems through their own epistemic logics (Nzewi, 1997; Agawu, 2003). While the macro category captures continental breadth, it risks flattening distinctions among indigenous traditions, contemporary art-music practices, and hybrid forms. It remains a useful umbrella term, but one requiring analytical refinement to preserve the internal diversity of African musical thought.

Within this broader field, African Traditional Music stands as an indigenous epistemic system grounded in communal authorship, ritual function, and embodied knowledge. Scholars highlight its integration of music, dance, spirituality, and social life, forming what Nzewi (1997) describes as a holistic aesthetic–philosophical continuum. Its epistemologies are transmitted orally through participation and communal memory. Aesthetic logics such as cyclicity, polyrhythm, call and response, hocketing, and layered ostinati express deeper cultural principles of time, relationality, and collective identity (Chernoff, 1979; Arom, 1991). African Traditional Music, therefore, constitutes a coherent indigenous system with distinct ontological and aesthetic trajectories, separate from both the macro category of African Music and the modern developments

of African Art Music. Its epistemic integrity forms the cultural foundation upon which other African musical systems draw.

African Art Music, by contrast, emerged in the twentieth century as a hybrid modern tradition shaped by African composers trained in Western classical techniques yet committed to articulating African musical thought. Composers such as Sowande, Euba, and Uzoigwe synthesised indigenous rhythmic, melodic, and tonal principles with Western harmonic and formal structures (Omojola, 1995; Euba, 1989). This synthesis produced a new epistemic formation: neither an extension of Western art music nor a replication of traditional forms, but a deliberate rearticulation of African identity within literate, concert-oriented frameworks. Its aesthetic logics reflect this hybridity, combining intentional structural design and motivic development with African rhythmic cycles, tonal inflections, and speech-surrogate patterns. As Omojola (1995) notes, African Art Music represents a modern intellectual project negotiating African identity within global modernity.

Despite rich scholarship on each domain, a major gap persists: the absence of comparative epistemic analysis examining how African Music, African Traditional Music, and African Art Music relate as interconnected yet distinct systems. This gap limits analytical precision by obscuring epistemic boundaries, aesthetic continuities, and conceptual divergences. Existing studies tend to operate in parallel, preventing the development of a unified model capable of explaining continuities and differences across the three systems. Without such a model, African musicology risks perpetuating conceptual ambiguities that obscure the internal logic of African musical thought and constrain its articulation as a structured intellectual tradition. These ambiguities also affect pedagogy, curriculum design, historiography, and global representations of African musical identity.

Conceptually, the three systems form a triadic structure: African Music as the overarching field, African Traditional Music as its indigenous epistemic core, and African Art Music as its modern intellectual extension. This structure informs the theoretical framework developed later in the study, where each system is analysed through its epistemic foundations and aesthetic trajectories. A comparative framework is essential for mapping their relationships, clarifying boundaries, and articulating shared and divergent aesthetic logics. This study responds by developing a comparative epistemic–aesthetic model grounded in African Musical Thought to illuminate the internal architecture of African musical systems. The resulting conceptual map positions the three systems not as isolated categories but as interrelated formations whose interactions reveal the depth, dynamism, and intellectual sovereignty of African musical thought.

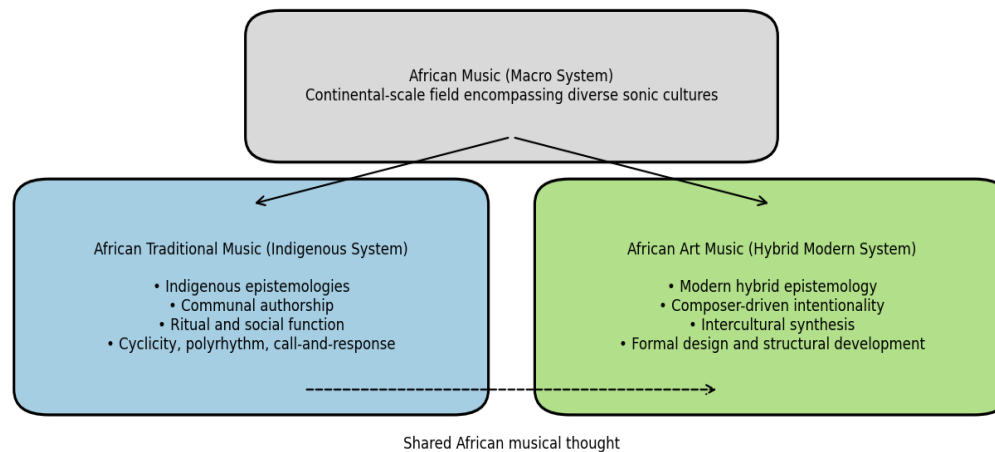


Figure 1. *Conceptual Map of African Musical Systems.*

Figure 1 illustrates the triadic structure discussed in the *Conceptual Clarification and Literature Positioning* section, positioning **African Music** as the overarching macro system from which two distinct yet interrelated subsystems emerge. **African Traditional Music** appears on the left as the indigenous epistemic core grounded in communal authorship, ritual function, and cyclic aesthetic logics, while **African Art Music** appears on the right as the hybrid modern system shaped by intercultural synthesis and composer-driven intentionality. The arrows and connectors highlight continuity, divergence, and shared foundations, visually reinforcing the conceptual distinctions and relationships articulated in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in African Musical Thought as its primary theoretical foundation, supported by Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory, Decolonial Musicology, and Comparative Epistemology. Each framework serves a distinct function: African Musical Thought provides the central epistemic and aesthetic lens; EMPT explains how musical knowledge is generated and transmitted; Decolonial Musicology situates the analysis within debates on epistemic justice; and Comparative Epistemology justifies the study's cross-system approach. Together, they ensure conceptual clarity and position the study within contemporary discussions on decoloniality and African knowledge systems.

African Musical Thought is the most appropriate primary framework because it conceptualises African music as a knowledge system embedded in indigenous worldviews, communal ethics, and cosmology. Scholars such as Nketia (1974), Nzewi (1997), and Agawu (2016) argue that African musical practices encode philosophical, historical, and social meanings that exceed aesthetic form. Nketia (1974) emphasises the inseparability of music from its social and ritual contexts; Nzewi (1997) highlights rhythmic and structural logics grounded in indigenous

theories of time and embodiment; and Agawu (2016) insists that African musical systems must be theorised from within African intellectual traditions. This framework therefore provides the conceptual grounding for interpreting the three musical systems as epistemic formations shaped by cultural memory, identity, and lived experience.

Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory (Authority, 2025) deepens this foundation by explaining how African musical knowledge is produced, transmitted, and embodied. The uploaded document describes EMPT as reclaiming African music as a “sovereign epistemological foundation for education” and positioning rhythm, storytelling, and performance as “vital instruments for transmitting ethical, historical, and identity-based knowledge” (Authority, 2025, p. 44). EMPT is valuable here because it frames music as curriculum rather than ornament, clarifying the internal logic of African Traditional Music and illuminating how African Art Music recontextualises indigenous principles within modern compositional frameworks. By foregrounding rhythm, narrative, and performance as pedagogical tools, EMPT strengthens the comparative analysis of how each system constructs and transmits knowledge.

Decolonial Musicology provides the philosophical orientation for situating the study within broader debates on epistemic justice and cultural sovereignty. Scholars such as Mignolo (2011), Maldonado-Torres (2007), and Agawu (2003) argue that colonial epistemologies have shaped the categorisation and valuation of African music, often marginalising indigenous knowledge systems. The uploaded document echoes this critique, noting the “long-standing curricular imbalance that privileges Eurocentric paradigms while marginalizing indigenous African epistemologies” (Authority, 2025, p. 45). Decolonial Musicology therefore supports the need to disentangle African musical systems from inherited colonial classifications and theorise them through African intellectual traditions.

Comparative Epistemology provides the methodological rationale for analysing the three systems as distinct yet related epistemic domains. African philosophers such as Wiredu (1998) and Hountondji (1996) emphasise the importance of comparative analysis grounded in indigenous categories of thought. This aligns with the uploaded document’s assertion that African musical traditions embody “ethical, cosmological, and identity-based knowledge” that must be understood on their own terms (Authority, 2025, p. 44). Comparative Epistemology enables the study to examine differences in ontology, knowledge structures, aesthetic logics, and transmission modes while identifying the continuities that bind the systems together.

Collectively, these frameworks create a coherent theoretical foundation. African Musical Thought provides the central conceptual engine; EMPT clarifies how musical knowledge is embodied and transmitted; Decolonial Musicology ensures historical and philosophical grounding; and Comparative Epistemology justifies the study’s comparative structure. This integrated configuration ensures conceptual rigour, decolonial grounding, and a strong contribution to African music scholarship.

Methodology

This study employed a conceptual, comparative, and epistemic–aesthetic research design to examine African Music, African Traditional Music, and African Art Music as distinct yet interconnected epistemic formations. This design was appropriate because the research questions required theoretical clarification rather than empirical measurement. Conceptual analysis enabled the interrogation of categories and constructs; the comparative dimension supported systematic cross-system mapping; and the epistemic–aesthetic lens ensured that knowledge structures and aesthetic logics were analysed together.

Data were drawn from four sources: peer-reviewed literature, published musical scores, ethnographic accounts, and documented indigenous knowledge. A total of 112 scholarly sources were reviewed, including monographs and journal articles by African musicologists and philosophers such as Nketia, Nzewi, Agawu, Omojola, and Euba. Sources were identified through systematic searches of JSTOR, Google Scholar, and AJOL using keywords such as “African Music”, “African Traditional Music”, “African Art Music”, “African musical epistemology”, and “African aesthetics”. Only academically vetted works published between 1970 and 2025 were included. Eighteen musical scores were purposively selected from composers whose works exemplify African Art Music, including Sowande, Euba, and Uzoigwe. Ethnographic data were drawn from published fieldwork documenting indigenous practices, while indigenous knowledge sources included oral histories, practitioner testimonies, and theoretical expositions by African scholars. All data were publicly available; no human participants were recruited, and no ethics approval was required.

Analysis followed a stepwise, replicable protocol conducted over 14 weeks. Week 1 involved organising all data in a structured OneDrive folder. Weeks 2–4 focused on conceptual clarification, extracting definitions and epistemic claims into a coding matrix in Microsoft Excel. Weeks 5–7 involved comparative epistemic analysis using deductive coding informed by African Musical Thought to identify ontological assumptions and knowledge structures. Weeks 8–9 examined aesthetic logics through a parallel coding sheet capturing rhythmic, structural, and performative features. Weeks 10–12 synthesised epistemic and aesthetic codes into a cross-system comparative matrix. Weeks 13–14 integrated the findings into a unified conceptual interpretation. All coding decisions were documented in a version-controlled audit trail to ensure reproducibility.

Although the researchers served as sole coders, ambiguities were resolved through an internal adjudication protocol: revisiting the original source, checking the code against operational definitions, and documenting the rationale in the audit trail. This ensured consistency and transparency.

Microsoft Excel (Version 2025) was used as the primary coding tool because the dataset consisted of conceptual constructs rather than interview transcripts. NVivo 14 and Atlas.ti 23 were

considered but intentionally excluded to avoid unnecessary complexity. This decision is documented for replicability.

Rigour was strengthened through triangulation across theory, literature, and indigenous epistemologies. Theoretical triangulation involved cross-checking interpretations against African Musical Thought, Episto-Musical Pedagogy Theory, and decolonial epistemology. Data triangulation compared insights from literature, scores, and ethnography. Epistemic triangulation validated interpretations against indigenous knowledge to ensure cultural fidelity. Reflexive memos documented interpretive decisions, and all data were stored securely in encrypted folders with cloud backups.

As a conceptual and comparative study, the methodology is limited by its reliance on secondary data and the uneven availability of documented indigenous knowledge. African musical systems are culturally diverse, and no single analysis can capture all regional or stylistic variations. These limitations were mitigated through credibility (triangulation), dependability (audit trail), confirmability (reflexive memos and indigenous epistemologies), and transferability (thick conceptual descriptions).

The methodological choices align directly with the study's aims: conceptual analysis clarified conflated categories; comparative analysis mapped relationships across systems; and the epistemic–aesthetic lens captured the dual nature of African musical thought as knowledge and art. The stepwise procedure ensures replicability, and the triangulation strategy ensures credibility and epistemic integrity. The methodology, therefore, provides a transparent and defensible foundation for the study's conclusions.

Epistemic Foundations of African Musical Systems

African Music (Macro Epistemology)

African Music, understood as a macro epistemology, operates as a social ontology in which music is inseparable from lived experience, communal structures, and cosmological worldviews. Scholars such as Nketia (1974) and Nzewi (1997) emphasise that African musical thought is grounded in relationality, where sound functions as a mode of knowing, being, and acting within the world. Music encodes communal identity, ethical values, and historical memory, functioning as a social text rather than an autonomous aesthetic object. Agawu (2003) critiques Western analytical traditions for fragmenting African music into isolated parameters, arguing instead that African musical epistemology is holistic, integrating sound, movement, language, and sociality. North African epistemologies further broaden this macro frame: Andalusian art-music traditions and Amazigh cosmological sound practices, as articulated by Aydoun (1992), Touma (1996), and Schuyler (2009), demonstrate that African musical thought encompasses diverse regional ontologies while maintaining a shared philosophical grounding in embodiment, relationality, and

communal meaning. Islamic epistemologies, particularly within Maghrebi and Andalusian musical lineages, also shape conceptions of modality, spirituality, and aesthetic intentionality, reinforcing the interconnectedness of sound, ethics, and metaphysics in North African musical thought.

African Traditional Music

African Traditional Music represents the indigenous epistemic core of the macro system, grounded in cosmologies that link sound to spirituality, ritual efficacy, and communal continuity. Nzewi (1997) describes indigenous African musical systems as cosmologically anchored, where performance mediates relationships between human, ancestral, and spiritual realms. Ritual and spirituality therefore shape not only musical meaning but also the epistemic conditions under which music is produced and transmitted. Oral transmission functions as both pedagogy and epistemology, embedding musical knowledge in embodied practice, apprenticeship, and communal participation. Scholars across the continent reinforce this view: Nketia (1974) in West Africa, Kubik (2010) in Central and Southern Africa, and Kidula (2013) in East Africa all highlight that rhythmic complexity, cyclicity, and participatory performance are expressions of deeper indigenous logics of time, relationality, and collective agency. African Traditional Music is not monolithic; its epistemic forms vary across regions, languages, and cultural ecologies, reflecting the continent's vast diversity while maintaining shared philosophical foundations. Traditional music thus operates as a communal epistemology in which authorship is distributed, creativity is collective, and knowledge is sustained through intergenerational continuity.

African Art Music

African Art Music emerges as a modern epistemic formation shaped by the encounter between African musical thought and Western literate traditions. Composers such as Fela Sowande, Akin Euba, and Joshua Uzoigwe developed a literate epistemology that integrates African rhythmic, tonal, and structural principles with Western harmonic and formal techniques. Omojola (1995) argues that this synthesis is not derivative but represents a deliberate intellectual project in which African composers negotiate identity, modernity, and global artistic discourse. The shift from oral to literate epistemology introduces new modes of intentionality, where the composer becomes a central agent shaping musical meaning. Yet, as Euba (1989) and Akrofi (2002) note, African Art Music retains deep connections to indigenous aesthetics, particularly in its rhythmic logic, motivic development, and cultural symbolism. Contemporary East African composers such as Justinian Tamusuza extend this epistemic trajectory, integrating Kiganda rhythmic structures and indigenous performance practices into modern compositional frameworks (Cooke, 2016; Tamusuza, 1999). This system therefore embodies a dual epistemic orientation: it is rooted in African musical thought while simultaneously engaging global modernity, translating African identity into written, concert-oriented, and globally intelligible forms.

Comparative Epistemic Synthesis

A comparative reading of the three systems reveals both convergences and divergences in their epistemic foundations. Across all systems, African rhythmic logic, melodic identity, and communal aesthetics function as shared epistemic anchors, whether expressed through indigenous ritual performance or modern compositional design. These elements reflect a common African musical consciousness grounded in relationality, embodiment, and collective meaning. However, divergences emerge in authorship, transmission, performance ecology, and formal structures. African Traditional Music privileges communal authorship, oral transmission, and ritual performance contexts, whereas African Art Music foregrounds individual compositional agency, literate transmission, and concert-stage performance. The macro system accommodates both without collapsing their epistemic distinctiveness. This epistemic synthesis provides the conceptual foundation for the analytical framework developed later in the study, where these convergences and divergences are operationalised into comparative analytical categories. The synthesis, therefore, highlights African musical systems as interconnected epistemic formations whose differences illuminate the breadth and depth of African musical knowledge.

Table 1

Epistemic Comparison of African Music, African Traditional Music, and African Art Music

Epistemic Dimension	African Music (Macro Epistemology)	African Traditional Music	African Art Music
Ontology	Music as social ontology; sound as relational being; holistic integration of life, cosmology, and community.	Music as cosmological mediation linking human, ancestral, and spiritual realms; ritual-centred ontology.	Music as intentional artistic creation situated between African identity and global modernity; dual ontological grounding.
Knowledge Structures	Embodied, communal, integrative knowledge combining sound, movement, language, and sociality.	Indigenous knowledge encoded through ritual, spirituality, cyclicity, and intergenerational continuity.	Literate, compositional knowledge blending African rhythmic and tonal logics with Western harmonic and formal systems.
Transmission	Participation-based learning; communal immersion; embodied apprenticeship.	Oral transmission; apprenticeship; communal participation; memory-based pedagogy.	Notation-based transmission; formal instruction; conservatoire and academic training.
Authorship	Collective identity; diffuse authorship embedded in community.	Communal authorship; creativity distributed across performers, lineage, and ritual specialists.	Individual authorship; composer-centred intentionality; intellectual ownership.
Performance Ecology	Socially embedded performance integrated into daily life, ceremony, and communal events.	Ritual, ceremonial, and functional performance contexts tied to cosmology and social order.	Concert-stage, academic, and formal performance contexts; global circulation.

Table 1 synthesises the epistemic distinctions discussed in Section 8.4, providing a structured comparative overview of the three musical systems across core analytical dimensions.

Table 2
Aesthetic Comparison Matrix for African Music, African Traditional Music, and African Art Music

Aesthetic Dimension	African Music (Macro Epistemology)	African Traditional Music	African Art Music
Rhythmic Logic	Cyclic, participatory, relational rhythmic structures embedded in social interaction.	Complex polyrhythms, cross-rhythms, and timeline patterns tied to ritual and communal functions.	Hybrid rhythmic structures combining African cyclicity with Western metrical organisation.
Melodic Identity	Speech-tone sensitivity; call-and-response; communal melodic shaping.	Modal, pentatonic, or heptatonic systems linked to language, ritual, and lineage.	Motivic development blending African melodic cells with Western thematic techniques.
Text–Music Relationship	Integrated with language, movement, and social meaning.	Texts tied to ritual, praise, spirituality, and oral poetry.	Texts shaped by compositional intention; often multilingual or symbolic.
Performance Aesthetics	Embodied, communal, participatory; emphasis on collective energy.	Ritualised, symbolic, spiritually charged; performer–community reciprocity.	Formal, staged, interpretive; emphasis on artistic intentionality and technical refinement.
Instrumental/Timbral Aesthetics	Indigenous timbres integrated with voice, movement, and social context.	Idiophones, membranophones, aerophones, and chordophones tied to lineage and ritual identity.	Expanded palette including Western orchestral instruments, African instruments, and hybrid ensembles.

The matrix in Table 2 extends the epistemic synthesis by comparing the three systems across core aesthetic dimensions, complementing the discussion in Section 8 and preparing the ground for the analytical framework.

Table 3
Operationalisation of the Analytical Framework

Analytical Category	Definition	Operational Indicators	Application Across Systems
Ontology	How each system conceptualises the nature and purpose of music.	Ritual function, social function, artistic intention, cosmological grounding.	Distinguishes communal ontology (Traditional) from dual ontology (Art Music).

Knowledge Structures	The epistemic logics shaping musical meaning.	Embodiment, literacy, cosmology, intergenerational continuity.	Identifies how knowledge is encoded, preserved, and transmitted.
Transmission Mode	How musical knowledge is taught and learned.	Oral pedagogy, notation, apprenticeship, conservatoire training.	Clarifies differences between oral and literate epistemologies.
Authorship Logic	How creative ownership is conceptualised.	Collective authorship, lineage-based authorship, individual composition.	Differentiates communal creativity from composer-centred intentionality.
Performance Ecology	The social, ritual, or artistic contexts of performance.	Ritual setting, communal event, concert stage, academic venue.	Maps ecological shifts across systems.
Aesthetic Logic	The principles shaping musical form and expression.	Rhythm, melody, timbre, text–music relations, ensemble structure.	Enables cross-system aesthetic comparison.

Table 3 translates the epistemic and aesthetic foundations into operational analytical categories used in the study’s formal analysis. It ensures transparency, replicability, and methodological coherence.

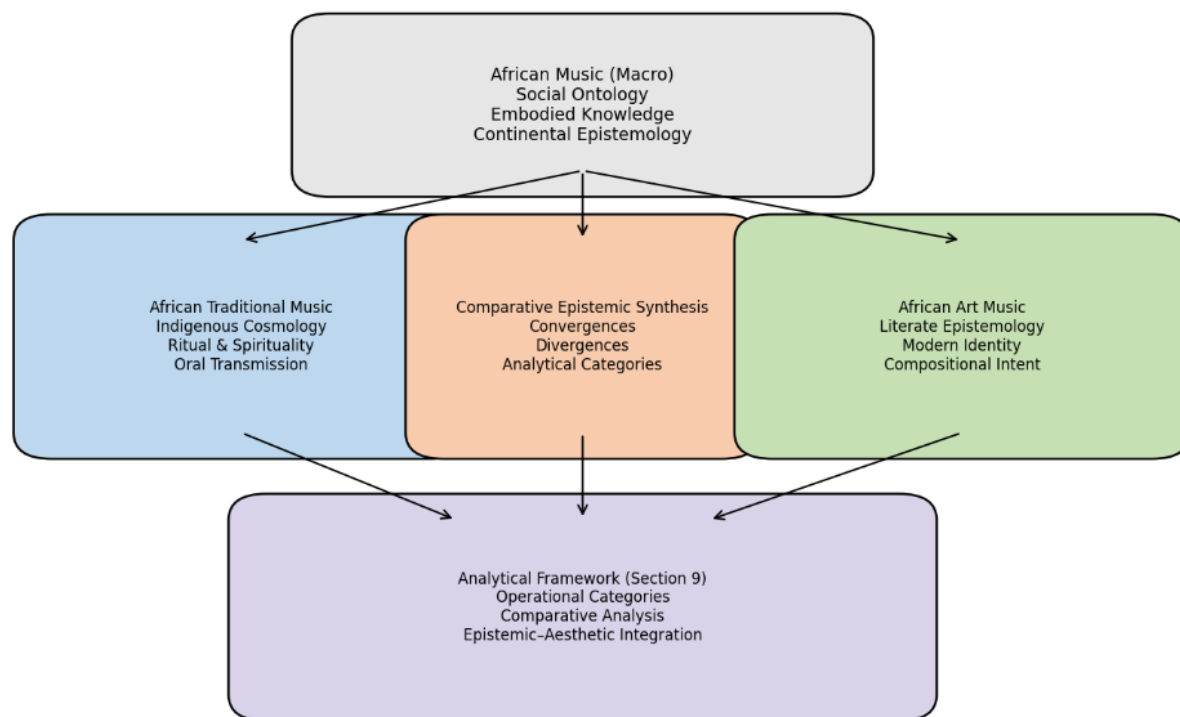


Figure 2. *Conceptual Model of Epistemic Relationships Among African Musical Systems*

Figure 2 offers a concise visual synthesis of the epistemic relationships linking African Music as a macro epistemology with African Traditional Music and African Art Music. It shows how the macro framework underpins the distinct yet interconnected epistemic logics of the two systems,

while the Comparative Epistemic Synthesis mediates between them by identifying points of convergence and divergence. The figure also demonstrates how these relationships feed directly into the study's Analytical Framework, where they are translated into operational comparative categories that guide the analysis.

Analytical Framework

Purpose and Orientation

The analytical framework provides a structured method for examining African musical systems through their epistemic, aesthetic, and performance logics. Its purpose is to translate earlier conceptual distinctions into operational categories that support systematic, comparative analysis across African Music as a macro epistemology, African Traditional Music, and African Art Music. The framework illuminates how each system produces, transmits, and enacts musical meaning while enabling cross-system interpretation without collapsing their epistemic distinctiveness.

Conceptual Foundations

The framework draws on African musicological scholarship that foregrounds epistemic and aesthetic logics. Foundational work by Nketia (1974), Nzewi (1997), and Kubik (2010) informs the categories of rhythmic logic, transmission, and indigenous knowledge structures, while Agawu's (2003) critique of analytical fragmentation supports a holistic, relational approach. Scholarship on African Art Music, particularly Euba (1989) and Omojola (1995), guides the analysis of modern, literate compositions. These foundations ensure that the framework is culturally grounded and theoretically robust.

Analytical Categories

Six analytical categories operationalise African musical epistemologies. Ontology addresses each system's conception of music; knowledge structures examine how meaning is generated; transmission mode identifies pedagogical mechanisms; authorship logic explores creative ownership; performance ecology situates music within social or artistic contexts; and aesthetic logic captures rhythmic, melodic, timbral, and structural principles. Together, these categories offer a comprehensive lens for analysing diverse African musical systems.

Rationale for the Categories

Each category reflects a core dimension of African musical meaning. Ontology and knowledge structures address philosophical foundations, echoing Nzewi's (1997) emphasis on cosmology and social embeddedness. Transmission and authorship align with Nketia's (1974) focus on oral pedagogy and communal creativity. Performance ecology situates practice within lived contexts, while aesthetic logic enables structural analysis without detaching music from its cultural grounding. The categories therefore provide a balanced, culturally sensitive analytical framework.

Analytical Procedures

Analysis proceeds through sequential steps to ensure consistency and depth. First, each musical example is situated within its epistemic formation. Second, it is examined through all six categories to identify its epistemic grounding, transmission mode, authorship logic, performance ecology, and aesthetic structure. Third, findings are compared across systems to identify convergences, divergences, and hybridities. Finally, results are synthesised into an interpretive account explaining how musical meaning is produced within and across systems. This process maintains transparency and alignment with African epistemologies.

Cross-System Applicability

The framework functions across all three systems without privileging any. Its categories accommodate the communal, ritual-centred logics of African Traditional Music, the literate intentionality of African Art Music, and the holistic relationality of African Music as a macro epistemology. This flexibility supports both intra-system analysis and comparative interpretation.

Expected Analytical Outcomes

The framework is designed to reveal how each system constructs musical meaning and how epistemic and aesthetic logics interact. It clarifies convergences and divergences in rhythm, melody, authorship, and performance, and shows how African Art Music negotiates identity, tradition, and modernity. More broadly, it deepens understanding of African musical knowledge and provides a rigorous foundation for the study's analytical chapters.

Analysis

Analytical overview and case selection rationale

This analysis applies the framework to two contrasting case studies: Amazigh Ahwach from southern Morocco and Justinian Tamusuza's *Mu Kkubo Ery'Omusaalaba* for string quartet. Ahwach exemplifies a communal, ritual-centred indigenous formation in which ontology, transmission, and performance ecology are inseparable from Amazigh identity, oral poetry, and collective embodiment. Tamusuza's quartet represents a literate, intercultural African Art Music work that synthesises Kiganda idioms with Western string quartet practice, foregrounding authorship, compositional intentionality, and modern identity. Together, these cases allow the framework's categories, ontology, knowledge structures, transmission, authorship, performance ecology, and aesthetic logic, to be tested across traditional and art-music formations with high analytical resolution.

Amazigh Ahwach: Indigenous cosmology, communal ontology, and performance ecology

Ontologically, Ahwach is not conceived as autonomous art but as a communal act fusing poetry, rhythm, dance, and social communication. It expresses Amazigh identity during weddings, harvests, festivals, and village ceremonies, where music reinforces social cohesion and ritual presence. Knowledge structures are embedded in oral poetry (amarg), cyclic rhythms, and choreographed group movement, transmitted through participation, imitation, and long-term communal practice. Transmission is fully oral and performative, shaped by elders, poets, and master drummers without centralised control.

Authorship is collective: a lead poet or raïs may guide the performance, but creativity emerges from group interaction. Performance ecology is site-specific, tied to villages in the High Atlas, Anti-Atlas, and Souss, and rarely transported intact due to its scale and ritual embeddedness. Aesthetic logic centres on synchronised movement, antiphonal exchanges, frame-drum timbres, and coordinated visual display, producing a dense sonic-kinetic texture where rhythm, text, and gesture co-produce meaning.

Tamusuza's *Mu Kkubo Ery'Omusaalaba*: Literate epistemology and intercultural aesthetic logic

Tamusuza's *Mu Kkubo Ery'Omusaalaba* occupies a different epistemic formation, operating within African Art Music while remaining rooted in Kiganda musical thought. Ontologically, it is a notated concert work for string quartet, yet its structural language draws on Kiganda dance rhythms, instrumental simulations, and call-and-response textures. Knowledge structures are literate and compositional: ideas are fixed in score, designed for Western-trained performers, and shaped by the composer's intercultural training and engagement with Kiganda practice.

Transmission is notation-based and institutional, mediated through conservatoires and professional ensembles, though grounded in the composer's immersion in oral Kiganda traditions. Authorship is explicitly individual: Tamusuza is the named composer, and the work circulates globally under his authorship while encoding communal Kiganda idioms. Performance ecology is that of the international concert stage; the Kronos Quartet's *Pieces of Africa* recording positioned the work within global contemporary-music circuits. Aesthetic logic features polyrhythmic blocks, hemiola, limited pitch materials, and simulations of indigenous instruments (endingidi, drums) through string techniques, producing a hybrid sound world that is both recognisably string quartet and distinctly Kiganda.

Comparative epistemic–aesthetic synthesis

Viewed through the analytical framework, Ahwach and *Mu Kkubo Ery'Omusaalaba* reveal both continuity and divergence. Both draw on African rhythmic logics, participatory or participatory-derived structures, and strong text–music or gesture–music relationships, indicating a shared macro epistemology in which music is relational, embodied, and socially meaningful. Their ontologies diverge sharply: Ahwach is a communal, event-bound practice, whereas Tamusuza's quartet is a fixed, authored work designed for repeatable performance by distant ensembles. Knowledge structures and transmission modes contrast oral, locally embedded pedagogy with literate, institutionally mediated learning.

Authorship and performance ecology mark the shift from communal intentionality and village-square contexts to individual authorship and global concert circulation. Aesthetic logic shows how similar rhythmic and textural principles manifest through different media: collective frame-drum and choral performance in Ahwach, and Western string quartet techniques in Tamusuza's work. Together, the case studies confirm the framework's capacity to capture both the continuity of African musical consciousness and the diversity of its epistemic and aesthetic expressions, validating its cross-system applicability and preparing the ground for broader repertoire analysis.

Discussion

The core insight of this study is that African musical systems are best understood through an epistemic lens that foregrounds their ontological, aesthetic, and knowledge-production logics rather than through reductive stylistic categories. This reframes African music scholarship toward understanding how musical meaning is generated, transmitted, and enacted across contexts, and it bridges ethnomusicology and African Art Music studies, which are often treated as separate domains.

The study addressed the problem of analysing African musical systems comparatively without collapsing their epistemic distinctiveness or reinforcing binaries between traditional and modern forms. The findings show that an epistemic–aesthetic framework effectively reveals the underlying logics shaping musical practice across systems. The analyses of Amazigh Ahwach and Tamusuza’s *Mu Kkubo Ery’Omusaalaba* demonstrate that African musical systems share a relational, embodied, socially grounded ontology yet diverge in authorship, transmission, and performance ecology. This directly answers the research questions by showing how meaning is produced within each system and how cross-system comparison can occur without imposing external categories.

Interpretively, the patterns suggest that African musical systems are unified by a macro epistemology rooted in relationality, embodiment, and social function, even when their aesthetic realisations differ. This extends Nzewi’s (1997) argument that African music is a knowledge system embedded in social life, while complicating Nketia’s (1974) emphasis on communal creativity by showing how individual authorship emerges in African Art Music without severing indigenous epistemic ties. It also challenges Agawu’s (2003) critique of analytical fragmentation by demonstrating that a unified framework is possible when grounded in African epistemic principles. The study therefore advances scholarship by offering a culturally grounded, analytically flexible method.

The findings also contribute to debates on modernity, hybridity, and intercultural composition. Tamusuza’s quartet shows that African Art Music reconfigures rather than merely appropriates indigenous materials, supporting Omojola’s (1995) view of creative synthesis. Ahwach, conversely, highlights the resilience of indigenous performance ecologies, aligning with Kubik’s (2010) argument that African musical systems remain dynamic. Together, these insights refine understandings of continuity and transformation in African music.

An unexpected tension emerged in the shared aesthetic logics across the two systems. Polyrhythmic layering, call-and-response structures, and embodied cues appear in both Ahwach and Tamusuza’s quartet, suggesting deeper continuities than anticipated. This indicates that African musical consciousness may operate through translatable principles across oral and literate domains. Rather than undermining system distinctions, this tension underscores the need for analytical models that accommodate both divergence and continuity.

The study’s limitations stem from its focus on two case studies, which cannot represent the full diversity of African musical systems. This should be viewed as a boundary of interpretation rather than a weakness, as the framework is adaptable to additional repertoires. Future research could apply it to other regions, genres, or diasporic contexts to test its broader applicability.

The implications are theoretical, methodological, and practical. Theoretically, the framework offers a model grounded in African epistemologies that bridges traditional and art-music scholarship. Methodologically, it provides a replicable tool for comparative analysis that

avoids stylistic essentialism. Practically, it suggests pathways for curriculum development, composition pedagogy, and intercultural performance practice by foregrounding epistemic understanding over surface style. These implications prepare the ground for the Conclusion.

Conclusion

This study examined how African musical systems can be analysed comparatively without collapsing their epistemic distinctiveness or reinforcing binaries between traditional and modern forms. It addressed this problem by developing and applying an epistemic–aesthetic framework grounded in African musical thought, demonstrating that African musical systems are best understood through the logics that generate, transmit, and enact meaning rather than through stylistic descriptors or external categories.

The study constructed a coherent analytical model and demonstrated its applicability through two contrasting case studies. It showed that African musical systems share a relational macro-epistemology while maintaining distinct ontological, aesthetic, and knowledge-production logics. Its contributions are theoretical, methodological, and empirical. Theoretically, it advances the argument that African music is unified by epistemic principles rooted in relationality, embodiment, and social function, extending the insights of Nzewi, Nketia, and Omojola. Methodologically, it offers a replicable framework that bridges ethnomusicology and African Art Music studies. Empirically, it provides a comparative reading of Amazigh Ahwach and Tamusuza's *Mu Kkubo Ery'Omusaalaba*, revealing both continuity and divergence across oral and literate formations.

The overarching insight is that African musical systems, despite their diversity, operate through epistemic logics that are translatable across contexts, enabling comparison without erasing cultural specificity. This shifts African music scholarship toward an epistemic orientation that foregrounds how musical knowledge is produced and enacted, bridging descriptive ethnography and analytical musicology. It also refines debates on modernity, hybridity, and intercultural composition by showing that African Art Music reconfigures rather than ruptures indigenous epistemologies.

The study's implications extend to research, pedagogy, and creative practice. The framework offers a model for analysing African musical systems in ways that respect their epistemic foundations while enabling cross-system dialogue. It supports curriculum reform by foregrounding epistemic logics over stylistic categories and encourages composers and performers to engage African musical principles with greater epistemic sensitivity.

Future research should apply the framework to additional repertoires across Africa and the diaspora to test its adaptability and refine its categories. Comparative studies involving Islamic, Christian, diasporic, or urban popular traditions would illuminate how epistemic logics operate

across different socio-historical formations. Further work on African Art Music could explore how composers negotiate authorship, identity, and global circulation in ways that challenge assumptions about modernity. These directions respond to the study's limitations, which stem from the restricted number of case studies.

In conclusion, this study shows that an epistemic–aesthetic approach offers a powerful means of understanding African musical systems on their own terms while enabling rigorous comparative analysis. By foregrounding the logics that shape musical meaning, it contributes to a more integrated, conceptually grounded, and epistemically sensitive African musicology. It affirms that African musical systems, in all their diversity, are united by deep structures of knowledge, creativity, and relationality that continue to shape musical expression across the continent and beyond.

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