

FROM ROOTS TO INNOVATION: THEMATIC METAMORPHOSIS AND TRANSFORMATION OF NIGERIA'S MODERN ART MUSIC SCENE

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Abstract

This article explores the thematic and structural transformation of Nigeria's modern art music, tracing its evolution from indigenous musical idioms through colonial imprints to contemporary innovation. It aims to examine how Nigerian composers have negotiated cultural identity, spirituality, and modernity through a blend of traditional motifs and Western compositional techniques. The study addresses the gap in scholarship regarding the interplay between heritage and innovation in Nigerian art music narratives. Employing a historical-ethnomusicological approach alongside thematic-hermeneutic analysis, the research draws on archival records, musical scores, and oral testimonies. Theoretical grounding is provided by Postcolonial Theory—focusing on hybridity and decolonial discourse—and African Aesthetics, emphasizing communal symbolism and indigenous knowledge systems. Focusing on key works by composers such as Fela Sowande, Ayo Bankole, and Joshua Uzoigwe, the study identifies recurring themes of hybridity, spiritual resonance, and cultural reclamation. Findings reveal a deliberate metamorphosis in both content and form, underlining the resilience and ingenuity of Nigerian art composers. The article concludes that Nigeria's modern art music is not merely an artistic evolution but a dynamic site of cultural reimagination. This underscores its relevance in contemporary African scholarship and global musicological discourse.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Evolution, Hybridity, Metamorphosis, Thematic, Transformation.

Introduction

Nigeria's modern art music refers to a genre of composed music that synthesizes Western classical techniques with indigenous Nigerian musical idioms, philosophies, and performance practices. Emerging in the early 20th century through the influence of missionary education and colonial institutions, this genre has since evolved into a distinct musical tradition cultivated by formally trained Nigerian composers such as Fela Sowande, Ayo Bankole, and Joshua Uzoigwe (Omojola, 2012; Sadoh, 2007). Unlike popular or folk music, modern art music is characterized by its notated form, formal concert presentation, and deliberate integration of African and European musical vocabularies (Euba, 1989).

Central to this evolution is the concept of thematic metamorphosis—a process by which composers transform indigenous themes, symbols, and sonic materials into new artistic expressions. This metamorphosis is both stylistic, involving changes in form, harmony, and instrumentation, and philosophical, reflecting shifts in cultural identity, spirituality, and postcolonial consciousness (Okafor, 2005). Through this lens, Nigerian art music becomes a site of negotiation between tradition and innovation, continuity and rupture.

The significance of this transformation extends beyond national borders. Within postcolonial discourse, it exemplifies the creative agency of African composers in reclaiming and redefining cultural narratives through music (Nzewi, 1991). Globally, it challenges Eurocentric paradigms by asserting African aesthetics as legitimate foundations for modern compositional practice. As such, Nigeria's modern art music contributes to a broader reimagining of global musicology—one that values intercultural dialogue, hybridity, and the decolonization of sound.

Aim and Objectives

To critically examine the thematic metamorphosis and structural transformation of Nigerian modern art music from its indigenous roots to contemporary innovation, this paper seeks:

- To trace the historical evolution of Nigerian art music through colonial and postcolonial contexts.
- To analyze how composers like Fela Sowande, Ayo Bankole, and Joshua Uzoigwe embed indigenous themes and values in Western forms.
- To investigate the role of cultural hybridity, spiritual identity, and philosophical reflection in shaping modern Nigerian musical aesthetics.
- To apply postcolonial and African aesthetic theories in decoding musical works as sites of cultural negotiation.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the burgeoning body of work by Nigerian art composers, there remains a significant gap in scholarly literature examining how these musicians have negotiated the tension between cultural heritage and modern artistic expression. Previous studies have often treated indigenous and Western musical systems as separate domains, overlooking the nuanced ways in which thematic elements from oral traditions, spirituality, and colonial legacies are transformed within contemporary compositional practice. This article addresses the need for an integrated analytical framework that recognizes both the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of these transformations.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a historical-ethnomusicological approach to trace the evolution of Nigeria's modern art music from indigenous sonic traditions through colonial disruption to postcolonial innovation. Drawing on archival materials and oral histories, it contextualizes musical development within socio-cultural transitions and institutional influences. Complementing this, a thematic-hermeneutic analysis is employed to decode the symbolic and cultural meanings embedded in selected compositions. Through close reading of scores and texts, the research interrogates how composers embody narratives of identity, spirituality, and transformation. These methodologies are situated within Postcolonial Theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's concept of *hybridity*, to examine how composers negotiate cultural boundaries and assert artistic agency. Additionally, African Aesthetics provides a lens for interpreting indigenous philosophies of sound, orality, and communal meaning-making as foundational to the metamorphosis under study.

Historical and Cultural Foundations

(a) Pre-colonial and Indigenous Musical Practices

(i) Role of Music in Community, Ritual, and Oral Traditions

In pre-colonial Nigeria, music was deeply embedded in the social, spiritual, and political fabric of life. It functioned not merely as entertainment but as a medium for ritual expression, historical transmission, and communal identity (Nzewi, 1991). Music accompanied every stage of life—from birth ceremonies and initiation rites to marriage, warfare, and funerals. It was also a key vehicle for oral traditions, where griots, praise singers, and drummers preserved genealogies, proverbs, and moral codes (Falola, 2022).

Musical performances were often participatory, involving call-and-response singing, drumming, and dance. Instruments such as the *udu*, *ogene*, *goje*, and *shekere* were not only tools of sound but also symbols of cosmological and ancestral communication (Euba, 1989). For example, the Yoruba *bàtá* drum ensemble was used in rituals to invoke the Orisha deities, with each drum rhythm corresponding to specific spiritual messages (Oludare, 2019).



Figure 1. - A transcribed *bàtá* rhythm pattern used in Sango worship, showing its polyrhythmic structure and tonal inflection.

(ii) Regional Musical Identities

Nigeria's ethnic diversity fostered a rich mosaic of musical traditions. The Yoruba developed complex drumming systems and tonal chants that mirrored their tonal language and hierarchical social structure (Oludare, 2019). The Igbo emphasized percussive ensembles like the *ogene* and *udu*, often used in storytelling and masquerade performances. The Hausa, influenced by Islamic culture, cultivated praise poetry (*waka*) and melodic instruments like the *kakaki* and *goje*, often performed in royal courts and religious festivals (Emielu, 2013).

These regional identities were not isolated but interacted through trade, migration, and interethnic festivals, creating a dynamic precolonial soundscape that laid the groundwork for later musical synthesis.

(b) Colonial Interventions

(i) Introduction of Western Musical Structures

The advent of British colonialism in the 19th century introduced Western musical forms such as hymns, tonic sol-fa notation, and military band music. Missionaries used hymns as tools for evangelism, translating Christian texts into local languages while imposing Western harmonic structures (Sadoh, 2007). The tonic sol-fa system became the dominant method of music instruction in mission schools, simplifying Western notation for African learners but also displacing indigenous pedagogies (Kwami, 1994).

Military bands, introduced by colonial administrators, further entrenched Western instrumentation and repertoire. These bands often performed marches, anthems, and European classical pieces, influencing early Nigerian composers to adopt Western forms like the sonata and cantata (Omojola, 2012).

(ii) Missionary Education and Western Schooling Systems

Missionary schools became the primary sites for formal education, including music. By the early 20th century, nearly all schools in Nigeria were controlled by Christian missions, which used education as a tool for religious conversion and cultural assimilation (Odike, 2025). Indigenous musical practices were often dismissed as “pagan” or “primitive,” leading to their marginalization in formal curricula (Onyeji, 2023). However, these institutions also produced the first generation of Nigerian art composers—such as T.K.E. Phillips and Fela Sowande—who later reclaimed indigenous elements within Western frameworks, initiating the thematic metamorphosis that defines Nigeria’s modern art music today (Euba, 1989; Sadoh, 2007).

Evolution of Nigerian Art Music

(a) Early Pioneers and Foundational Composers

The emergence of Nigerian art music as a distinct genre is closely tied to the pioneering efforts of Thomas King Ekundayo Phillips and Fela Sowande, whose works laid the foundation for a Yoruba-Christian musical synthesis that would shape the trajectory of modern Nigerian composition.

T.K.E. Phillips (1884–1969), often regarded as the *father of Nigerian church music*, was the first Nigerian to formally theorize the integration of indigenous Yoruba musical elements into Western liturgical frameworks. His seminal treatise *Yoruba Music* (1953) articulated how tonal language, rhythmic complexity, and traditional melodies could be harmonized using Western techniques. Phillips’ compositions—such as *Passacaglia on an African Folk Song*—demonstrate this synthesis, employing Yoruba melodic contours within classical organ forms (Omojola, 2012).

The image shows a musical score for a four-part vocal setting titled "Ise Oluwa" by T.K.E. Phillips. The tempo is marked "Moderately slow". The score is written for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass voices. The lyrics are "I - se O - lu - wa ko le ba - je o". The music is in a key with two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a common time signature. The Soprano and Alto parts have a melodic line with a call-and-response structure, while the Tenor and Bass parts provide harmonic support with sustained notes and some melodic movement.

Figure 2. - “Ise Oluwa” by Phillips, highlighting the use of parallel thirds and call-and-response phrasing rooted in Yoruba choral tradition.

Fela Sowande (1905–1987), a student of Phillips, expanded this vision by incorporating African folk themes into larger Western forms such as the sonata, cantata, and symphonic poem. His *African Suite* (1955) and *Obangiji* (1950) exemplify thematic metamorphosis—transforming traditional melodies into orchestral textures while preserving their spiritual and cultural essence (Sadoh, 2007). Sowande’s work reflects a deep commitment to cultural nationalism, using music as a vehicle for postcolonial identity formation (Euba, 1989).

Together, Phillips and Sowande established a compositional ethos that valorized indigenous material while engaging with global art music traditions—a legacy that continues to inform Nigerian art music today.

(b) Institutional Milestones

The institutionalization of Nigerian art music was catalyzed by the establishment of academic music departments and professional music societies, which provided platforms for training, performance, and scholarly discourse.

The Department of Music at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), founded in 1961, was the first full-fledged music department in the country. It pioneered a *bi-musical curriculum* that placed African and Western music on equal footing, fostering a generation of composers, educators, and ethnomusicologists (Adeogun, 2025). Notable alumni include Lazarus Ekwueme and Joshua Uzoigwe, whose works furthered the thematic and structural transformation of Nigerian art music.

Similarly, the University of Lagos and other institutions followed suit, offering degree programs that emphasized composition, performance, and African musicology. These academic centers became incubators for stylistic experimentation and cultural reclamation.

The Musical Society of Nigeria (MUSON), established in 1983, played a pivotal role in promoting classical and contemporary music through its School of Music, Symphony Orchestra, and Annual Festival of the Arts. The MUSON Diploma Programme, launched in 1989, has produced over 300 graduates, many of whom now serve as performers, educators, and composers across Nigeria and abroad (MUSON, 2025).

The Association of Nigerian Musicologists (ANIM) has also been instrumental in advancing scholarly research and discourse on Nigerian art music. Through conferences, journals, and advocacy, ANIM has fostered critical engagement with themes of identity, innovation, and decolonization in music education and composition (Onyeji, 2023). Authority, (2025). Asserts:

The Society of Music Educators of Nigeria (SOMEN) has emerged as one of the leading seminal forces in the cultivation and advancement of modern Nigerian art music. Its unwavering commitment to scholarly inquiry and academic praxis has engendered substantive contributions to the intellectual and aesthetic development of the genre. Through its strategic orchestration of academic conferences, peer-reviewed publications, and institutional sponsorships, SOMEN has established critical forums for the interrogation of salient themes such as cultural hybridity, musical identity, postcolonial modernity, artistic innovation, and Pan-Africanist ideology. These multifaceted engagements have significantly enriched the pedagogical landscape, compositional practice, and performance culture within Nigeria, while simultaneously elevating the global visibility and scholarly appreciation of Nigerian art music traditions.(p.6)

These institutional milestones have not only sustained the growth of Nigerian art music but have also positioned it as a dynamic force within global musicological discourse.

Thematic Metamorphosis

The evolution of Nigeria's modern art music is marked by a profound thematic metamorphosis—an ongoing reconfiguration of musical and sociocultural narratives that reflect the nation's historical, spiritual, and intellectual journey. This transformation is evident in the ways composers have reimagined indigenous materials, colonial legacies, and sacred traditions within contemporary art music frameworks.

(i) From Ancestral to Intellectual: Folklore, Proverbs, and Mythology in Composed Works.

Early Nigerian composers drew heavily from ancestral oral traditions—folktales, proverbs, and mythology—as thematic reservoirs. These elements, once embedded in communal rituals and storytelling, have been recontextualized into formal compositions that engage with intellectual and philosophical discourse.

Ayo Bankole's *Piano Sonata No. 2* (1966), subtitled "*The African*", exemplifies this shift. The work integrates Yoruba rhythmic idioms and melodic inflections with Western sonata form, transforming oral motifs into abstract musical arguments (Omojola, 2012). Similarly, Joshua Uzoigwe's *Talking Drums Suite* (1991) employs the tonal and rhythmic language of Igbo drumming to articulate themes of memory and identity, bridging ancestral performance with modern pianistic expression (Omordia, 2022).

These works reflect what Nzewi (1991) describes as the "intellectualization of indigenous knowledge systems," where composers act as cultural philosophers, translating communal wisdom into concert idioms.

(ii) From Colonial Repertoire to African Identity Assertion

During the colonial era, Nigerian composers were trained in European classical traditions, often replicating Western forms and aesthetics. However, the post-independence period witnessed a decisive shift toward cultural self-assertion. Composers began to reject Eurocentric paradigms, instead crafting works that foregrounded African identity and autonomy.

Sam Akpabot's *Scenes from Nigeria* (1962) is emblematic of this transition. Scored for orchestra, the piece draws on Ibibio folk melodies and rhythmic structures, asserting a nationalistic voice within a Western orchestral framework (Sadoh, 2007). This thematic pivot aligns with Bhabha's (1994) notion of *hybridity*, where cultural elements are not merely juxtaposed but synthesized into new, autonomous expressions.

SCENES FROM NIGERIA

Andante con moto ♩ = 100 1. Pastorale Samuel Akpabot, Opus 1

Figure 7. - Opening of Akpabot's *Scenes from Nigeria*, highlighting pentatonic melodic lines and polyrhythmic layering.

This postcolonial reorientation reflects a broader ideological movement in Nigerian art music—one that seeks to reclaim narrative agency and redefine modernity through indigenous lenses (Sadoh, 2005).

(iii) From Sacred to Secular: Blending Liturgical Traditions with Concert Music.

Another axis of thematic metamorphosis is the blurring of sacred and secular boundaries. Early Nigerian art music was deeply rooted in Christian liturgical traditions, shaped by missionary influence. Over time, composers began to adapt sacred materials for concert performance, creating hybrid works that transcend ecclesiastical confines.

Bankole's *ObiaraMma* (1972), originally conceived as a sacred choral piece, has been performed in both liturgical and concert settings. Its use of Igbo text, modal harmony, and call-and-response structure reflects a deliberate inculturation of Christian worship music (Okafor, 2005). Similarly, Uzoigwe's *Egwu Amala* reimagines traditional dance rhythms within a concert piano idiom, transforming communal spirituality into performative art.

This thematic shift underscores what Muonwe (2023) terms “sacral secularism”—a compositional strategy that preserves spiritual depth while engaging broader aesthetic and intellectual audiences.

Innovation and Contemporary Trends

The contemporary landscape of Nigerian art music is marked by bold innovation and stylistic pluralism. Composers and performers are increasingly engaging in cross-genre experimentation, leveraging digital technologies, and drawing inspiration from diasporic experiences to redefine the boundaries of modern African art music.

(a) Cross-genre Experiments: Fusion of Afrobeat, Highlife, and Jazz Idioms into Orchestral Compositions

Contemporary Nigerian composers are increasingly blending Afrobeat, highlife, and jazz idioms into orchestral and chamber music settings. This fusion reflects a deliberate effort to bridge popular and classical traditions, creating a hybrid soundscape that resonates with diverse audiences.

Afrobeat, pioneered by Fela Kuti, is itself a fusion of highlife, jazz, and traditional Yoruba rhythms, characterized by polyrhythmic percussion, call-and-response vocals, and politically charged themes (Romero, 2023). Recent composers have extended this legacy by orchestrating Afrobeat motifs within symphonic frameworks. For instance, contemporary works by composers like Seun Owoaje and Michael Olaniyan incorporate highlife guitar riffs and jazz harmonies into string and wind arrangements, creating a vibrant Afro-symphonic idiom.

This stylistic convergence not only expands the expressive palette of Nigerian art music but also challenges the dichotomy between “serious” and “popular” music traditions (Omojola, 2012).

(b) Technological Integration: Digital Audio Workstations and Film Scoring

The advent of digital audio workstations (DAWs) such as Logic Pro, Cubase, and FL Studio has revolutionized music production in Nigeria. These tools enable composers to simulate orchestral textures, manipulate indigenous samples, and produce high-quality scores without access to traditional ensembles (Professions.ng, 2025). Nigerian art musicians now compose, mix, and master works from home studios, democratizing access to composition and performance.

Moreover, a growing number of Nigerian composers are venturing into film scoring, crafting soundtracks that blend traditional motifs with cinematic orchestration. Notable examples include Michael “Truth” Ogunlade and Tunde Jegede, whose scores for Nollywood and international films integrate talking drum rhythms, pentatonic scales, and ambient textures.

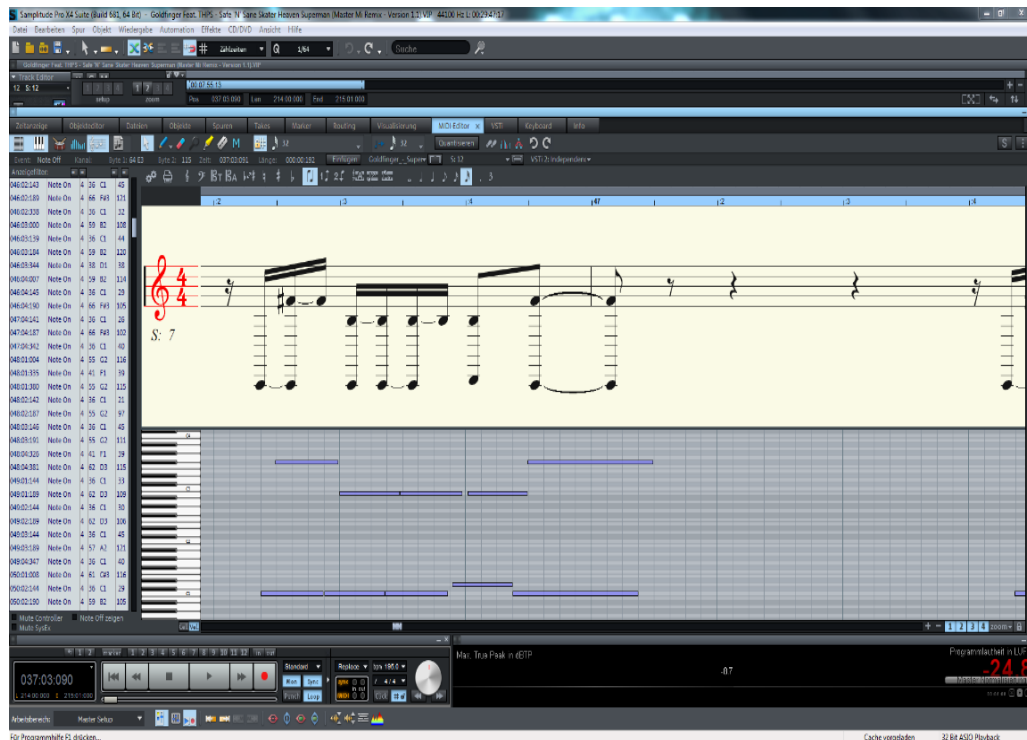


Figure 3. - A DAW-based orchestral showing integration of sampled *udu* and *shekere* within a suspense motif. This technological shift has not only enhanced creative autonomy but also positioned Nigerian composers within global media industries.

(c) Diaspora Influence: Contributions of Nigerian-born Composers Abroad

Diasporic Nigerian composers continue to shape the global perception of African art music through innovative works that reflect bicultural identities. Nkeiru Okoye, an American composer of Nigerian descent, exemplifies this trend. Her orchestral works—such as *Voices Shouting Out* and *When the Caged Bird Sings*—blend African-American spirituals, Yoruba rhythmic sensibilities, and Western symphonic traditions to explore themes of resilience and identity (Okoye, 2024).

Similarly, Kevin Olusola, a classically trained cellist and beatboxer of Nigerian heritage, reimagines classical performance through a contemporary lens. His solo album *Dawn of a Misfit* (2024) fuses cello improvisation with electronic textures and spoken word, reflecting a diasporic narrative of hybridity and innovation (Olusola, 2024).

These diasporic voices not only expand the stylistic range of Nigerian art music but also serve as cultural ambassadors, bridging African traditions with global audiences.

Findings, Challenges, and Opportunities

Findings

- The study reveals a deliberate thematic and structural metamorphosis in Nigerian modern art music, characterized by a fusion of indigenous idioms with Western compositional forms.
- Recurring themes such as cultural hybridity, spiritual symbolism, and identity reclamation are evident in the works of leading composers like Fela Sowande, Ayo Bankole, and Joshua Uzoigwe.
- This transformation is not merely stylistic but philosophical, reflecting postcolonial agency, aesthetic negotiation, and innovative responses to socio-cultural evolution.

Challenges

- Limited funding and infrastructural deficits continue to hinder music production, academic research, and performance opportunities for emerging art musicians in Nigeria.
- The curriculum for music education remains heavily Westernized, with insufficient emphasis on African compositional techniques, instruments, and epistemologies.
- There is a lack of archival preservation and scholarly dissemination of contemporary Nigerian art music, leading to marginalization within global discourse.

Opportunities

- Digital streaming platforms (e.g., Spotify, Boomplay) and online concert series provide expanding avenues for international visibility and audience engagement.
- Participation in global festivals and academic symposia offers opportunities for Nigerian composers to position their work within broader musicological conversations.
- Reforms in higher music education—incorporating practice-based research, African aesthetics, and interdisciplinary frameworks—can equip a new generation of culturally rooted, globally relevant composers.

Contribution to Scholarship

- This article contributes to Nigerian and African musicology by illuminating the artistic strategies through which composers transform indigenous themes into sophisticated art music. It proposes a dual theoretical lens—Postcolonial Theory and African Aesthetics—to reframe the discourse on hybridity and innovation within African compositional practices. By foregrounding the lived philosophies, sonic heritage, and creative ingenuity of Nigerian composers, the research enriches global musicological dialogue and advocates for a more inclusive canon of contemporary art music.
- It bridges a critical gap in African musicological research through its dual theoretical framework to interpret the metamorphosis of Nigerian art music.
- It foregrounds underrepresented compositional voices and highlights how music functions as a vehicle of cultural self-definition and innovation.
- The study contributes to decolonizing musicological narratives, positioning Nigerian modern art music as a vital component of contemporary African intellectual and creative thought.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the thematic and structural metamorphosis of Nigeria's modern art music, tracing its progression from indigenous oral traditions and colonial impositions to innovative contemporary forms. Through a synthesis of traditional motifs and Western compositional techniques, Nigerian composers have developed a resilient artistic voice that articulates evolving identities, spiritual depth, and postcolonial agency.

The creative ingenuity of pioneers such as Fela Sowande, Ayo Bankole, and Joshua Uzoigwe underscores a deliberate reimagining of cultural narratives. Their works exemplify a dynamic negotiation between heritage and innovation, reaffirming the role of music as both a vessel of memory and a platform for intellectual engagement.

Given the significance of this transformation, there is a pressing need for sustained documentation, institutional support, and global recognition of Nigerian art music. Encouraging interdisciplinary scholarship, enhancing music education with African-centered content, and promoting performance opportunities are critical to preserving and advancing this evolving genre. As a vibrant space of cultural reimagination, Nigeria's art music deserves continued scholarly attention and celebration within African and global musicological discourses.

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