

## TOWARDS DECOLONISING PIANO STUDIES IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: ANALYSES OF TWO ETUDES

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### Abstract

This article investigates the imperative of decolonizing piano pedagogy within Southeast Nigerian tertiary institutions by embedding indigenous musical practices into formal music education. Drawing on a practice-led research approach, the study introduces two original piano etudes- “*Kirijom*” and “*Surugede*”- as creative and pedagogical resources that synthesize African rhythmic idioms, tonal frameworks and performance aesthetics with established pianistic techniques. The work critiques the dominance of Eurocentric paradigms that continue to shape instructional methods, arguing for a culturally responsive curriculum that affirms local identity while maintaining technical and artistic standards. Through detailed compositional processes, structural analysis and interpretative strategies, the research demonstrates how African-derived piano repertoire can simultaneously enhance technical proficiency and promote cultural consciousness. Findings suggest that integrating such repertoire into teaching materials not only diversifies learning resources but also fosters inclusivity, creative and cultural sustainability within music programs. This study also extends the discourse on decolonization in the creative arts, offering a replicable model for transforming piano studies in postcolonial contexts. By bridging indigenous knowledge systems and contemporary pedagogical practices, the work proposes a pathway toward a more inclusive, context sensitive approach to music education in Africa and beyond.

**Keywords:** Decolonization, piano pedagogy, African pianism, practice-led research, *Kirijom*, *Surugede*, Nigerian music education.

### Introduction

The pedagogy of piano studies in Nigerian tertiary institutions has been dominated by Western classical canon, with curricula and assessment models reflecting the aesthetics of composers such as Handel, Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin (Adeogun, 2021; Okafor, 1992). While these works undeniably represent significant achievements in global art music, their privileged position in Nigerian institutions perpetuates an epistemic imbalance that sidelines the nation’s own musical heritage. As a result, students often experience a disconnect between their identity and the music they are trained to perform and compose (Egbonu & Umeojiaka, 2024; Udoh & Ekong, 2024).

This Eurocentric orientation is increasingly being challenged by Nigerian scholars who advocate for the decolonization of music education in Nigeria through the reintegration of indigenous musical traditions into formal instruction. (Adeogun, 2021 & Udoh & Ekong, 2024). Udoh and Ekong (2024) further argued that despite efforts towards making music education in post-independent Nigeria to be bi-musical, the African elements are subservient to their Western counterpart. In other words, despite composition of African pieces by indigenous composers like Onyeji, Euba and Uzoigwe, our university classrooms are still dominated by Western epistemic models. Decolonization, therefore, is a child of necessity. Within decolonization movement, the piano occupies a unique position. Unlike indigenous instruments, it is an imported technology that has been naturalized into Nigerian art music practice. Consequently, it has become a site for both cultural negotiation and creative experimentation. The question, therefore, is not whether the piano belongs in Nigerian music education but how its pedagogy can reflect the cultural realities and artistic sensibilities of the African experience (Onyeji, 2008).

A key response to this challenge has been the emergence of African pianism as an intercultural compositional and pedagogical framework. Coined and theorized through the pioneering works of Akin Euba, African pianism advocates for the infusion of African rhythmic structures, tonal idioms and performance practices into piano composition, thereby challenging Western canonical hegemony (Boamah, 2012; Omojola, 2001). Euba’s ideas have inspired subsequent models such as drummistic piano composition by Christian Onyeji (2008, 2019), which translates the percussive textures and polyrhythmic layers of African drumming into piano language. Further contributions include Annan’s (2024) pedagogical model for creating African-inspired piano works and Ekpo’s (2023) exploration of decolonizing African musical thought while maintaining global relevance.

In addition to theoretical discourse, recent scholarship in creative arts education has emphasized practice-led research as a methodological paradigm for generating knowledge through artistic processes (Smith & Dean, 2009). This perspective legitimizes composition as both a creative and scholarly act, positioning the artist-researcher as an active agent in knowledge production. In this context, the creation of new piano works rooted in African musical idioms is not merely an artistic pursuit, but a pedagogical intervention aimed at addressing curricular imbalance.

This study aligns with these principles by presenting the composition of two piano etudes that integrate indigenous Nigerian rhythmic and melodic resources. These etudes are conceived not only as concert pieces but as pedagogical tools for Southeast Nigerian tertiary institutions. They demonstrate practical strategies for embedding African musical aesthetics into piano studies and serve as a template for culturally relevant instruction. Through this practice-led approach, the research seeks to answer two interrelated questions:

- How can indigenous musical structures be systematically transmitted into pianistic language?
- In what ways can such compositions contribute to the decolonization of piano pedagogy in Nigerian tertiary institutions?

Ultimately, this work argues that decolonizing piano studies is central to fostering cultural relevance, curricular inclusivity and artistic innovation Nigerian music education. By positioning indigenous traditions at the core of piano instruction, Nigerian tertiary institutions can produce musicians who are both technically proficient and culturally grounded, thereby redefining the global narrative of what it means to study and perform the piano in Africa.

The ensuing literature review engages with scholarship on decolonizing music education, African pianism and practice-led approaches to situate Nigerian piano pedagogy within its indigenous rhythmic and melodic frameworks thereby establishing the conceptual foundation for the study's methodology, analysis and interpretation of findings.

### **Colonial Legacies in Nigerian music Education**

Nigerian music education has historically been shaped by colonial influences that privileged Western art music as the ideal standard for musical excellence (Adeogun, 2021; Okafor, 1992). The persistence of these legacies manifest in curricula, examinations, and teaching methodologies that emphasize European repertoire and performance practices, leaving indigenous traditions marginalized in formal instruction (Udoh & Ekong, 2024).

However, the Nigerian society has been making efforts towards decolonization of its music education. As Adeogun (2021) observed, "it began to decolonize its university music education by adding African traditional music to the officially imposed Euro-American music educational ideas" (p. 4). This process, as he highlighted, began at the music Department of University Of Nigeria Nsukka [UNN](Ibid). According to him: Indigenization, Africanization, Islamization, Nigerianization and Globalization were five interventions by certain individuals and groups towards decolonizing university music education in Nigeria.

### **African Pianism as a Decolonial Framework**

The concept of African pianism emerged as a response to this imbalance, offering a theoretical and practical framework for integrating African aesthetics into piano composition (Euba as cited in Omojola, 2001; Boamah, 2012). African pianism is characterized using polyrhythm, call-and-response structures and modal tonalities and percussive that reflect indigenous instruments and vocal traditions. According to Boamah, "the percussive and melodic capabilities of the piano make it a most ideal medium for expressing the rhythmic and percussive features of African music" (p. 1). This suggests that although the piano is historically a Western instrument, African pianism constitutes a deliberate adaptation of the instrument to convey African musical aesthetics, thereby reflecting a synthesis of technical Western performance practice with indigenous melodic, rhythmic and harmonic sensibilities.

### **Drummistic Piano Composition and Indigenous Pedagogies**

Onyeji (2008) defined the drummistic piano style as "an approach to piano composition and performance that transfers the techniques of African drumming to the piano" (p. 4). Research on African musical pedagogy emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive approaches to instrumental instruction. In this context, Onyeji (2008) contends that piano pedagogy and performance could be rendered more engaging for students if the instrument were approached in a manner that mirrors the rhythmic and expressive qualities of the African drum, an instrument with which many students are intimately familiar from early childhood. This perspective aligns with broader arguments advocating for the incorporation of indigenous musical aesthetics into formal education, suggesting that students' motivation and expressive capacity may be enhanced when instruction resonates with their cultural and musical experiences. This approach, along with Annan's (2024) pedagogical strategies for creating African-inspired works, provides practical pathways for implementing decolonial ideas in music education.

### **Practice-Led Research in Creative Arts**

Practice-led research is increasingly recognized as a legitimate methodology in creative disciplines. According to Smith and Dean (2009), it involves generating knowledge through the act of making and reflecting on creative processes. It is research where creative practice is not only a subject of study but how research is conducted, and knowledge is produced. This implies that creative practice itself is a central method of inquiry and a primary outcome of research. Here, the practical components such as composition, performance or interpretation are not

just an illustration of findings but are the core through which insights emerge. Candy (2006) emphasizes that practice-led research not only produces artistic outputs but also advances theoretical understanding by sitting practice within scholarly discussion. In the context of decolonization, this methodology empowers researchers to re-center indigenous epistemologies through embodied artistic inquiry.

### Research Design

This study adopts a practice-led research design, a qualitative methodology that positions creative practice as a primary mode of inquiry (Smith & Dean, 2009). It is a research design that combines composition, performance and analysis. In this approach, the act of composition functions as both the research process and the research output, enabling a deeper interrogation of cultural and pedagogical issues through artistic creation (Smith & Dean). Specifically, the research involved composing two piano etudes- “*Surugede*” and “*Kirijom*”-to embody African rhythmic structures, tonalities and stylistic features within a pianistic framework. Thus, they were composed to explore strategies for decolonizing piano studies within Southeast Nigerian tertiary institutions.

### Data Sources

Three principal sources informed the study:

- Original Compositions: Two etudes were composed for this research- “*Surugede*” and “*Kirijom*”.
- Traditional Materials: Rhythmic and melodic patterns derived from the “*Surugede*” ensemble tradition and the “*Kirijom*” dance of the Igbo people of Southeast, Nigeria.
- Scholarly Literature: Foundational works on African pianism and decolonizing

### Compositional Process

This involves:

- 1: Selection of indigenous materials-rhythmic and melodic motifs derived from Southeast Nigerian music traditions.
- 2: Integration with piano technique. This involves combining African idioms with conventional pianistic gestures such as arpeggios, chordal voicings and scalar passages.
- 3: Analytical Reflection: This involves evaluating how these etudes address technical goals-hand coordination, articulation- while conveying African identity.

### Presentation and Analysis of the Etudes

#### Surugede

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$\text{♩} = 160$

5

9

13

17

21

2



## Analysis

### “Surugede” Form and Structure

“Surugede” exhibits a **binary structure (AB)** characterized by ostinato-driven sections and motivic variation. The design mirrors African call and response patterns, where a phrase is introduced and answered with rhythmic transformation.

**Figure 1** illustrates the opening ostinato pattern in the left hand, featuring steady crotchet notes against syncopated figures in the right hand. This repetitive structure serves as a foundation for motivic development.

**Figure 1. Excerpt frpm Surugede(bar 1-8)**

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**Figure 1.** Excerpt from “Surugede”(bar 1-8) showing left-hand ostinato and right- hand syncopation.

### Rhythmic Characteristics

Polyrhythm is central to this etude, with **3:2 cross-rhythms** and **syncopated accents** generating a sense of propulsion. Off- beat articulations in this etude mirror rhythmic practices derived from Igbo drumming traditions, particularly the displaced accents and cross-rhythmic structures associated with “Surugede” dance drumming (Onyeji, 2008; Jones, 1959).

**Figure 2** demonstrates a cross- rhythmic passage where the right hand executes triplets against the left hand’s duple subdivision.

**Figure 2. Cross-rhythm pattern(bar 16–20)**

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**Figure 2:**

### Melodic and Harmonic Language

Melody is pentatonic-based reinforcing African modal frameworks. Harmony functions colouristically rather than tonally emphasizing percussive chord clusters and parallel motion instead of Western functional progressions.

### Technical Demands

The etude develops

- Hand independence through contrasting rhythmic layers
- Endurance and precision in repeated ostinato figures.
- Dynamic control articulates rhythmic vitality.

### Cultural Symbolism

“Surugede” is linked to ancestral veneration and community unity in Igbo culture (Aniakor & Cole, 1984). Its rhythmic vitality and title signal reclamation of cultural identity in modern pianism.

## Kirijom

Emeka Egbonu

$\text{♩} = 150$

8

14

20

25

31





#### Form and Structure

“*Kirijom*” adopts a through-composed form, presenting evolving rhythmic and melodic materials. This is a characteristic feature often associated with African pianism’s emphasis on structural flexibility and thematic transformation rather than strict Western formal constraints (Ozah, 2013; Onyeji, 2008). In this etude, repetition of short motifs creates a texture reminiscent of African ensemble layering.

Figure 3 shows the opening rhythmic cells in the right hand, with quick alternations that demand staccato precision.

**Figure 3. Opening rhythmic figures in Kirijom (1-6)**

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#### Rhythmic Features

Metric flexibility dominates with alternating duple and triple groupings, syncopation and rest shaping a percussive character. Frequent juncture accents demand interpretive sensitivity.

**Figure 4** highlights a section (bar 38-47) where rests interrupt flow, producing a speech-like quality that reflects Igbo performance aesthetics.

Figure 4. Use of rests and asymmetrical grouping (bar 38-47)



Figure 4. Use of rests and asymmetrical grouping (bar 38-47)

### Melodic and Harmonic Features

The melodic contour in “*Kirijom*” employs a pentatonic framework enriched with ornamental leaps, a technique that resonates with Igbo vocal idioms, while harmonic language is largely non-functional, emphasizing textural density and rhythmic vitality rather than conventional tonal hierarchies ( Onyeji, 2008; Ozah, 2013).

### Technical and Pedagogical Aspects

- Staccato precision for repeated notes
- Agility in navigating asymmetric rhythmic groupings
- Balance between percussive touch and lyrical phrasing

### Cultural Context

The composition “*Kirijom*” draws on Igbo women’s dance traditions, incorporating communal participation and celebratory aesthetics into its pianistic language, a practice consistent with African pianism’s adaptation of indigenous performance contexts (Chukwu & Ume, 2020; Ozah, 2013; Onyeji, 2008).

### Discussion

Both etudes exemplify African Pianism by transferring indigenous musical logic to the piano. Their rhythmic intricacy, modal melodic language and non-functional harmonies contrast with Western etudes offering culturally grounded alternatives for technical development. Pedagogically, these works:

- Train rhythmic acuity and hand independence.
- Encourage interpretive engagement with African performance practices.
- Foster cultural pride by connecting piano study to local heritage.

Incorporating such works into tertiary curricula would address the colonial residue in music education, which privileges Western norms. By validating African pianistic compositions as legitimate pedagogical tools, tertiary institutions can advance both skill acquisition and cultural consciousness.

This study examined the imperative of decolonizing piano studies in Nigerian tertiary institutions through the analyses of two piano etudes, “*Kirijom*” and “*Surugede*”. Nigerian music education remains shaped by Western frameworks (Adeogun, 2021; Udoh & Ekong, 2024), thereby disconnecting curricula from cultural practices. Culturally informed approaches (Egbonu & Umeojiaka, 2024), African pianism (Boamah, 2012; Omojola, 2001) and practice-led research (Smith & Dean, 2009) provide frameworks for bridging this gap. Furthermore, the works of Nigerian scholars such as Onyeji (2008, 2019), Ekpo (2023), Adedeji (2013), Okafor (1992) and Annan (2024) demonstrate both theoretical and practical pathways for embedding indigenous traditions into piano pedagogy.

The analyses of “*Kirijom*” revealed polyrhythm, interlocking textures and pentatonic modalities that simulate indigenous drumming and melodic traditions. Its pedagogical contribution lies in training pianists in rhythmic independence and tonalities derived from local cultures. “*Surugede*” displayed dense cross-rhythms, motivic repetition and percussive textures, echoing ceremonial Igbo traditions. Its pedagogy cultivates metric flexibility and sensibility to African rhythmic aesthetics. Together, the etudes illustrate how African pianism fuses indigenous traditions with Western pianistic techniques to create culturally grounded yet globally relevant works.



The findings show significance for curriculum development. The etudes provide repertoire that embodies Nigerian cultural heritage and expand the canon of pedagogical materials available to students. They demonstrate composition as research (Smith & Dean, 2009), advancing decolonization not just theoretically but through practice.

### Conclusion

Overall, this study highlights the importance of reclaiming indigenous musical resources in shaping relevant pedagogical practices. The decolonization of piano studies in Nigeria can be meaningfully advanced through the adoption and integration of culturally grounded repertoire. “*Kirijom*” and “*Surugede*” prove that integrating indigenous rhythm, melody and texture can reconfigure piano pedagogy to affirm Nigerian identity while maintaining global relevance.

Future research should generate more indigenous-inspired compositions, design structured pedagogical frameworks and evaluate their classroom effectiveness. Through such sustained efforts, Nigerian tertiary institutions can achieve a decolonized piano curriculum that is inclusive, innovative and deeply rooted in African traditions.

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