

RETAINING AFRICAN IDENTITY IN ART MUSIC COMPOSITION THROUGH RHYTHM: AN ANALYSIS OF AGU'S 'I AM PROUD TO BE A NIGERIAN'

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Abstract

Over the years, African composers have made significant contributions to the global music landscape through the creation of works that meet international standards. However, some contemporary African composers, particularly younger ones, often fail to reflect their cultural heritage in their compositions, especially in works written in foreign languages. This tendency may result from attempts to emulate the compositional styles of renowned Western composers of the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods. In contrast, distinguished African composers and musicologists such as Dan C. C. Agu have successfully integrated African musical elements into their works, thereby preserving their cultural identity. This study examines the retention of African identity in choral music composition through the use of rhythm, using Agu's *I Am Proud to Be a Nigerian* as a case study. Through an analytical examination of the rhythmic structures employed in the work, the study demonstrates how indigenous African rhythmic practices can be effectively incorporated into contemporary choral compositions. The paper concludes by encouraging emerging African composers to consciously express their cultural heritage through their creative works.

Keywords: African identity, art music, composition, rhythm, composer

Introduction

Change is an inevitable phenomenon in human society and may occur either spontaneously or through external influences. Consequently, every culture in the world has experienced varying degrees of transformation over time. One of the major forces responsible for such transformation is globalization. According to Idolor (2009), globalization refers to the interconnectedness of people and societies across geographical, racial, and regional boundaries through advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), transportation, trade, and socio-cultural cooperation, resulting in what is commonly described as a global village.

Globalization has exerted both positive and negative influences on cultures around the world. While it has facilitated access to knowledge, technological advancement, and intercultural exchange, it has also contributed to the gradual erosion of certain indigenous cultural values and practices. In the African context, concerns have been raised regarding the dominance of Western cultural products and their impact on local cultural identities. Nwamara (2008) observes that Western societies have effectively utilized ICT to promote their cultural products globally, while many African societies largely remain consumers rather than promoters of their own cultural heritage. Such cultural products include music, education, language, fashion, religion, governance systems, and other aspects of social life.

Although these influences have provided numerous benefits, particularly for younger generations, they have also contributed to a weakening of attachment to indigenous cultural traditions. The desire to appear modern and globally relevant has led some Africans to distance themselves from their cultural roots, resulting in a gradual loss of cultural identity. This trend is particularly evident in musical practices, where some contemporary African musicians and composers consciously or unconsciously adopt Western stylistic models at the expense of indigenous musical elements.

The influence of Western musical traditions is especially noticeable in both popular and art music compositions. Many young African composers aspire to create works that resemble those of celebrated European composers from the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods. While intercultural musical exchange is an important aspect of artistic development, excessive imitation may lead to the neglect of indigenous musical characteristics that distinguish African art music. Consequently, questions of cultural identity and authenticity have become important concerns in contemporary African music scholarship.

African identity in music can be preserved through the creative integration of indigenous musical elements such as rhythm, melody, language, form, instrumentation, and performance practices.

Among these elements, rhythm occupies a central position because of its significance in African musical thought and expression. It is through rhythm that many African composers maintain a distinctive cultural identity even when employing Western compositional techniques and foreign languages.

This study therefore examines the retention of African identity in choral music composition through rhythm, using Professor Dan C. C. Agu's *I Am Proud to Be a Nigerian* as a case study. The paper investigates how rhythmic devices rooted in African musical traditions are employed in the work to project cultural identity and demonstrate the continued relevance of indigenous musical aesthetics in contemporary choral composition.

Methodology

This study adopts an analytical research design employing qualitative content analysis of the musical score. The rhythmic structures of the selected composition were examined to identify indigenous African rhythmic traits retained within the compositional framework.

The composition was purposively selected because of its explicit nationalistic orientation and the composer's reputation for integrating indigenous musical idioms into contemporary choral works. The score was examined using qualitative content analysis informed by African rhythmic theories advanced by Agu (1999) and Arom (1991). Rhythmic movements were identified, categorized, and interpreted according to selected indicators of African rhythmic practice, namely syncopation, mixed rhythm, polyrhythm, cyclic organization, and short durational movement.

Evolution of African Art Music Composition

Music composition is the creative process of organizing musical sounds into meaningful artistic forms. According to Scholes, as cited in Onwuekwue (2006), composition involves the arrangement of melodies, harmonies, counterpoints, phrases, themes, and movements into a coherent musical work. Beyond the mere notation of sounds, composition requires considerable intellectual and artistic engagement.

The development of African art music has been significantly influenced by globalization, particularly through Western colonization and Christian missionary activities in Sub-Saharan Africa during the nineteenth century. Missionaries established churches and schools that introduced Africans to Western education and musical training. This exposure facilitated the adoption of Western musical notation, theory, and compositional techniques. Early African composers such as Robert A. Coker and T. K. E. Phillips, who received formal musical education in Europe, produced works largely modeled after European classical traditions.

However, by the early twentieth century, African composers began seeking ways to express indigenous cultural identities within the framework of Western art music. This effort led to the emergence of Contemporary African Art Music, a genre characterized by the fusion of African and Western musical elements. In Nigeria, particularly among the Igbo, literary choral music gained prominence through the efforts of composers who adapted indigenous languages, folk melodies, and cultural themes into written musical forms. (Agu, 2002)

Despite their limited formal training, pioneer Igbo composers such as Nelson Okoli, Daniel Ojukwu, Ishmael Nwangene, Rev. Ofili Kerry, Ikoli Harcourt Opara, and Rev. David Okongwu successfully created original works that reflected both African and Western influences. Their compositions involved translating texts, creating new melodies, adapting folk tunes, and rearranging existing musical materials (Nwamara, 2009a).

Subsequent generations of African art music composers expanded upon these foundations. Following the establishment of music departments in Nigerian universities, notably at University of Nigeria, Nsukka, composers acquired more formal training and developed sophisticated compositional techniques. These composers sought to correct the limitations of earlier works while emphasizing African musical aesthetics and identity.

Mensah, as cited in Akpakpan (2006), identifies three broad categories of African art music composers: those who adhere strictly to Western compositional practices; those who blend Western and African musical elements; and those who employ predominantly African musical materials while occasionally utilizing Western structural models. This classification illustrates the diverse

approaches through which African composers have negotiated cultural identity, creativity, and modernity in the evolution of African art music.

Retaining African Identity in Art Music Composition

Identity refers to the unique characteristics that distinguish an individual, group, or culture from another. Although cultures undergo continuous change and development, preserving cultural identity remains essential. In artistic creation, this often involves integrating elements from different cultures while maintaining a stronger representation of one's indigenous cultural heritage. The quest for cultural identity has inspired many Nigerian art music composers to create works of international standard that reflect their African roots. This African identity is often evident in the melodic contours, rhythmic structures, formal organization, and textual content of their compositions. Similar to Nigerian literary figures such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, and Rems Umeasiegbu, who projected African worldviews through works written in both indigenous and European languages, Nigerian composers have retained their cultural identity by integrating indigenous musical idioms with Western compositional techniques.

According to Omibiyi, (as cited in Nwamara, 2009b), the rise of nationalism in Nigeria stimulated the development of creative art music as a reaction against excessive European cultural influence. Indigenous art music emerged through efforts to adapt Christian worship to African customs, thereby creating opportunities for the incorporation of native musical traditions.

Similarly, Ekwueme (2004) describes contemporary African art music as an intercultural form that incorporates elements of traditional African culture within compositions created by Western-trained musicians and intended for both African and non-African audiences. This development gave rise to several innovative genres, including African pianism, folk opera, orchestral compositions based on indigenous materials, and African vocal music.

Examples include Akin Euba's African pianism, Ayo Bankole's *Talking Drum*, Joshua Uzoigwe's *Scenes from Traditional Life*, Okechukwu Ndubuisi's *The Vengeance of the Lizard*, Meki Nzewi's *The Lost Finger: A Drop of Honey*, Fela Sowande's *Folk Symphony*, and Ekwueme's *Nigerian Rhapsody*. African vocal music also encompasses the arrangement of folk songs for solo, choral, and accompanied performances, as well as original compositions in indigenous and European languages.

This study examines the retention of African identity in contemporary literary choral composition through rhythmic practices, using Dan C. C. Agu's *I Am Proud to Be a Nigerian* as a case study. Ekwueme (2004) observes that the human voice occupies a central position in African musical traditions and that communal music-making is generally preferred to individual performance. Consequently, choral music remains one of the most significant expressions of African musical culture.

Drawing on this tradition, Professor Dan C. C. Agu has composed numerous choral works in both Nigerian and European languages, thereby expanding the repertoire available to African choirs beyond the predominantly Western choral literature inherited from the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods. Agu (2002) notes that his compositions are motivated by the desire to preserve cultural identity and maintain a connection with African roots.

Before examining *I Am Proud to Be a Nigerian*, it is necessary to consider the composer's background and the factors that influenced his musical development.

Prof. Dan. C. C. Agu

Daniel Chikpezie Christian Agu is a distinguished Nigerian ethnomusicologist, composer, conductor, performer, organist, and music educator. Born on 18 January 1949 in Ogidi, Anambra State, he hails from Obosi in Idemili North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. He studied Music at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and later obtained a doctorate in Ethnomusicology from Queen's University, Belfast, in 1984. He taught at the Anambra State College of Education, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and subsequently became a Professor in the Department of Music at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Professor Agu has composed over 600 musical works spanning choral, keyboard, anthem, and religious genres, and has served as a commissioned composer for numerous institutions and organizations. His compositions, many of which consciously integrate indigenous African musical elements with Western techniques, have

made significant contributions to the development of African art music, ethnomusicology, and music education in Nigeria.

Rhythm in African Sense

Rhythm is the movement of music in time, often organized as measurable units within a bar or measure. In Western musical thought, rhythm is conceived mathematically through the arrangement of note values, such as three crotchets in a bar, four quavers in a bar, or two minims in a bar. This Euro-American conception of time makes rhythm highly structured and metric, with beats serving as the framework that guides the performance of voices and instruments.

In Africa, however, there is often no specific vernacular term that corresponds exactly to the Western concepts of "music" or "rhythm." As Arom (1991) observes:

No African vernacular language has a generic term to designate it, nor does it have one for melody or rhythm... As for rhythm, it is simply thought of as the stimulus to which it gives rise, and for the most part, is given the same name as the choreography that it sustains (p. 10). African rhythm is not conceived as a single, isolated phenomenon but as a complex network of interrelated musical ideas. Although rhythmic organization may contain measurable elements, it is often experienced and expressed intuitively and instinctively. Musical movement in African traditions is characterized by flexibility in temporal organization, tonal expression, and emotional depth. African drums frequently perform both rhythmic and melodic functions, a quality often described as *melorhythm*. The sounds produced by these instruments stimulate bodily movement and dramatic expression, resulting in an inseparable relationship among music, dance, mime, and drama.

Rhythm forms the very fabric of African life and reflects the communal orientation of African societies. The complexity of African rhythmic structures often symbolizes life's challenges and emotional experiences. By maintaining a sense of the primary pulse while navigating intricate rhythmic patterns, performers develop the ability to balance stability with complexity. According to Arom (1991):

African cross-rhythm is extremely complex and is characterized essentially by the permanent sense of tension it creates. Different interwoven rhythmic figures are repeated cyclically and uninterruptedly. The interlocked structure may involve irregular accentuation as well, making it extremely difficult even for the trained listener to analyze by ear (p. 206).

Among the distinctive characteristics of Sub-Saharan African rhythmic practice are syncopation, mixed rhythmic units, cross-beats, and polyrhythms. These features are often manifested through short durational note values and the simultaneous repetition of two or more rhythmic patterns, phrases, or ostinati. The concurrent use of contrasting rhythmic patterns within a shared metric framework constitutes one of the defining features of African rhythmic practice and lies at the heart of African musical traditions.

I Am Proud to Be a Nigerian

I Am Proud to Be a Nigerian is a nationalistic song originally composed by Prof. Dan C. C. Agu in August 2012. An examination of the overall structure of the work leaves one in no doubt that the composer is deeply rooted in the African musical tradition. However, for the purpose of this study, emphasis is placed on the rhythmic structure of the composition. The question, therefore, is: what characteristics of African rhythm can be identified in this work? The rhythmic features evident in the piece include syncopation, mixed rhythm, polyrhythm, cyclic movement, and the use of short durational-valued notes.

Syncopation

In the African context, syncopation refers to the regular articulation of notes at points other than the beginning of beats, thereby placing emphasis on weak beats. Jones (1998) defined syncopation as "the deliberate upsetting of rhythm by shifting the accents to a beat that is normally unaccented" (p. 647). This phenomenon is common in African music and is evident throughout this composition, beginning from the very first bar. Example I, particularly measures 1, 3, and 5, illustrates this feature. Rather than commencing on the strong beat, the music begins on the second quaver of the first beat with a crotchet note, thereby accentuating the weaker part of the pulse and generating the rhythmic vitality commonly associated with African performance practices.

Example I (Bars 1-8)

Ni - ge - ria my coun - try, Ni - ge - ria my coun - try,
 Ni - ge - ria my coun - try, my home, my beau - ti - ful home.

Mixed Rhythm

In this study, mixed rhythm refers to the interaction of duple and triple subdivisions within a shared metric framework. This feature is illustrated in Example II, where the numbers ‘3’ and ‘2’ indicate the divisions of triple and duple units expressed in quaver values.

Example II (Bars 55-63)

Coun-try where I be-long. Thanks be to God I am a proud Ni - ge-ria.
 I will do my best for my coun-try, I will of-fer my best to its

Polyrhythm

Polyrhythm, a hallmark of African musical practice, involves the simultaneous combination of different rhythmic patterns performed by different voices or instruments. This characteristic is evident in the composition, as illustrated in Example III, where independent rhythmic lines interact to create a rich and complex rhythmic texture.

Example III (Bars 72-76)

I will do my best for Ni - ge - ria, I will
 my coun-try, Ni - ge - ria, my coun-try,
 ge - ria, I love Ni - ge - ria, I love Ni - ge - ria, I love Ni -
 thrive, Ni - ge - ria will sur - vive, Ni -
 do my best for my coun - try, I will
 Ni - ge - ria, my coun - try,
 ge - - ria, I love Ni - ge - - ria, I love Ni -
 ge - - ria will thrive, Ni -

Cyclic Movement

African rhythm is inherently cyclic in nature. A regulative rhythmic pattern or pulse often divides the music into recurring segments that provide continuity and structural coherence. This characteristic is evident in Example III. The cyclic movement spans bars 69–84 of the composition, where short rhythmic patterns in the various vocal parts are repeated successively. In this section, the tenor part provides the regulative rhythmic pattern around which the other voices revolve

Short Durational Valued Notes

African songs are generally characterized by the predominance of notes with short durational values. Agu (1999) observed that:

The use of notes of short durational values as the basis of movement has provided African songs with good metrical organization. Although very many songs are in simple duple, triple or quadruple time, nevertheless, quarter notes, eighth notes and their corresponding dotted notes serve as common units of movement, while full and half notes, in most cases, serve as marginal notes, with sixteenth notes occasionally complementing fractions of dotted notes and their subdivisions in cases where the linguistic peculiarities of the verbal text dictate. (p. 50)

This characteristic is also evident in *I Am Proud to Be a Nigerian*, where the rhythmic motion is sustained largely through the use of quavers and other relatively short note values.

Conclusion

Globalization has created opportunities for cultural exchange and artistic development; however, it has also contributed to the gradual marginalization of certain indigenous cultural expressions within contemporary African societies. Rather than viewing globalization solely as a threat to cultural continuity, it can also serve as a platform for the promotion, preservation, and dissemination of African artistic products. The analysis of *I Am Proud to Be a Nigerian* demonstrates that African identity can be sustained in contemporary choral compositions, even when such works are written in foreign languages. Through the incorporation of indigenous rhythmic elements, composers can create choral repertoire that is both authentically African and universally accessible. The findings reveal that rhythm remains a potent medium for articulating cultural identity in contemporary art music. Through the strategic deployment of syncopation, polyrhythmic interaction, cyclic organization, mixed rhythmic structures, and short-duration rhythmic movements, Agu successfully negotiates the interface between indigenous aesthetics and modern compositional practice. The study therefore affirms the continuing relevance of African rhythmic principles in art music composition and emphasizes the need for emerging composers to engage creatively with indigenous musical resources in producing works of both local significance and global appeal.

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I AM PROUD TO BE A NIGERIAN

Allegretto ♩ = 150 By Prof. Dan C.C Agu, August 2012.

(Doh is Ab)

SOPRANO
 Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, my home, my beau-ti ful home.

ALTO
 Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, my home, my beau-ti ful home.

TENOR
 Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, my home, my beau-ti ful home.

BASS
 Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, my home, my beau-ti ful home.

9
 Ni-ge-ria my coun - try Ni-ge-ria my coun - try Ni-ge-ria my coun-try, my home, my sweet home.

I love you so Ni-ge-ria my coun-try Ni-ge-ria my coun-try my coun-try, my home, my sweet home.

I love you so Ni-ge-ria my coun-try Ni-ge-ria my coun-try my coun-try, my home, my sweet home.

I love you so Ni-ge-ria my coun-try Ni-ge-ria my coun-try my coun-try, my home, my sweet home.

18
 My home, my pride, my home my beau-ti ful home. I'm proud of Ni-ge-ria, I'm proud to be a Ni-ge-rian.

My beau-ti-ful home, My beau-ti-ful home, o o I'm proud to be a Ni-ge-rian.

My beau-ti-ful home, My beau-ti-ful home, o o I'm proud to be a Ni-ge-rian.

2

26

I'm hap-py to be your child. My coun- try, so blessed with ma-ny tribes, My coun- try,
 I'm hap-py to be your child, your child. you, you, you, you, you, you,
 I'm hap-py to be your child, be your child. o, you, you, you, you, you

35

so blessed with ma-ny cul - tures, My coun- try, so co-loured with beau-ti-ful plains, hills and moun-tains,
 you. you, you, you, you, beau-ti-ful hills and moun-tains, o

43

ri-vers and va-lleys, large po-pu - la-ton, All kinds of mi-ne-rals and vast fer-tile lands. A
 yes! o yes o yes, o yes, o yes, vast fer-tile lands. A

73 | l :- .f | s .f : r .r | s : m | - : m .m | l :- .l | s : t .t | d : d | - : s .s | l .l :- .f | s .f : r .r

do my best_ for Ni - ge - ria, I will do my best for my coun - try, I will of-fer my best_ for its
 Ni-ge- ria, my coun-try. Ni-ge- ria, my coun-try, Ni-ge- ria, my coun-try,
 ge - ria, I love Ni - ge - ria, I love Ni - ge - ria, I love Ni - ge - ria, I love Ni - ge - ria, I love Ni -
 ge - ria will thrive. Ni - ge - ria will sur-vive, Ni - ge - ria will sur

78 | s : m | - : m .m | l :- .r | s : f | s .f :- .m | - .f : r .r | s :- | t : t | d :- | - .f : r .r | s :- | t : t

pro - gress. I will work for peace and u-ni - ty so that Ni - ge - ria will thrive, so that Ni - ge - ria will
 my coun-try. Ni-ge ria, my coun-try. so that Ni - ge - ria will thrive, so that Ni - ge - ria will
 ge - ria, I love Ni - ge - ria, I love Ni - ge - ria, so that Ni - ge - ria will thrive, will thrive, so that Ni - ge - ria will
 vive, Ni - ge - ria will thrive. so that Ni - ge - ria will thrive, will thrive, so that Ni - ge - ria will

84 | d :- | : | d :- | : [Eb.s] : | : | : | : | : | : [s]d' | r' :- d' | r' .d' : t | d' .d' :- | - : t

thrive. thrive. [s] God keep us, keep us to - ge - ther, to -
 thrive. thrive. God keep us, keep us to - ge - ther, keep us to - ge - ther. God keep us, keep us to - ge - ther, to -
 thrive. I love Ni - thrive. God keep us, God keep us, keep us to - ge - ther, to -
 thrive. thrive. God keep us, keep us to - ge - ther, to -

91 | r' : d' | - . d' : t. d' | l : - . t. l | s : - . l. s | f : - . s. f | m : - . f. m | r : m . r | d . l : s. fe | s : s : - | d' . d' - . t | d' . d' : - | - : s

ge- ther. keep us to - ge ther, keep us to - ge ther, keep us to - ge-ther. I

ge-ther. keep us, keep us, keep us, keep us, keep us, o keep us to - ge ther, keep us to - ge-ther.

ge-ther. keep us, keep us, keep us, keep us, keep us, o keep us to - ge ther, keep us to - ge-ther.

ge-ther. keep us, keep us, keep us, keep us, keep us, o keep us to - ge ther, keep us to - ge-ther. I

97 | f : - . m | f . m : r . d | l : f | r : l . t | d . l : t . d | r . t : d . r | m . d : r . m | f . r : s | s : m | f : m . r | m : - | - : m

love Ni - ge - ria my coun - try, I love my coun - try, love my coun - try, I love my great coun - try. My

I love, I love, I love, I love my great coun - try. My

I love, I love, I love, I love my great oun - try. ss. My

love Ni - ge - ria my coun - try, I love, I love, I love, I love my coun - try. My

103 | l . l : l | s : - . m | f : - . m : - | l : - | s : - | l . l : l | s : - . s | **rall.** l : f . m | r : r | s : - | t : - | d : - | - : -

beau-ti - ful home, a great home, rich home, won-der-ful place a great coun - try, I love you so.

beau-ti - ful home, a great home, rich home, won-der-ful place a great coun - try, I love you so.

beau-ti - ful home, a great home, rich home, won-der-ful place a great coun - try, I love you so.

beau-ti - ful home, a great home, rich home, won-der-ful place a great coun - try, I love you so.