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Between Communal Rhythm and Digital Code: Modernization, AI, and the Democratic Ethos of West African Music

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Abstract

This paper examines the interrelationship between democracy, African musical ideology, and modernization from the mid-twentieth century to twenty-first century musical practices, with a specific focus on West African traditions. Following the independence struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, African music became a central force in shaping political identity and mobilizing democratic consciousness. African musical ideology, rooted in communal participation and dialogic performance, resonated with emerging democratic values. The paper clarifies that this "democratic ethos" is understood not as liberal representative democracy but as a metaphorical democracy – a participatory, egalitarian social logic embedded in performance practices such as call-and-response structures, collective rhythmic negotiation, and consensus-based decision-making within musical ensembles. These traditions, particularly pronounced in West African drumming and vocal forms (e.g., Highlife rhythm section, Igbo folkloric akuko n'egwu traditions, Yoruba dundun ensembles), instantiate values of horizontal dialogue, distributed agency, and communal authorship that parallel democratic ideals without replicating Western institutional models. However, modernization through urbanization, media technology, globalization, and digitization, especially in the face of recent advances in artificial intelligence, has both enriched and challenged these traditions. This theoretical study, drawing on postcolonial theory and cultural studies frameworks, explores how modernization and AI affect the democratic ethos inherent in West African musical practices. It argues that while modernization provides avenues for innovation and global recognition, it also risks eroding communal structures, participatory values, and indigenous ideologies through mechanisms of commodification, the elevation of individual stardom over collective creation, and the displacement of indigenous temporal and harmonic systems by Western norms. The study concludes that a balanced approach – one that combines legal protections for traditional forms, community-led technological adaptation, and ethical frameworks for AI engagement – is necessary to safeguard cultural identity while embracing modern trends in music and governance.

Keywords: African musical ideology, West African music, Metaphorical democracy, Modernization, Artificial intelligence, Postcolonial theory, Cultural preservation

Introduction

The mid-twentieth century marked a watershed moment in African history, as independence movements swept across the continent and redefined cultural and political landscapes. Music played a crucial role in this transformation, functioning as both a mirror of democratic aspirations and a mobilizing force for national consciousness. African musical ideology, characterized by collective participation, inclusivity, and social accountability, provided a natural parallel to democratic principles (Agawu, 2003; Nzewi, 1999). However, the democracy embedded in these traditions is not liberal representative democracy in the Western institutional sense. Rather, it is a metaphorical democracy – a participatory, egalitarian social logic instantiated through performance practices such as call-and-response structures, collective rhythmic negotiation, and consensus-based decision-making within

musical ensembles. In traditional contexts, music was not only a form of entertainment but also a democratic space where individuals and communities expressed opinions, resolved conflicts, and reinforced shared identity.

This democratic ethos is articulated through the core tenets of African musical ideology: collective authorship, distributed agency, and moral accountability to the community. In musical production and performance, ideology shapes composition, appearance, and delivery within open communal spaces that must cohere with indigenous doctrines of moral justification and cultural identity. This participatory logic finds expression in the works of artists such as Stephen Osita Osadebe, Oliver de Coque, Ezigbo Obiligbo, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Victor Uwaifo, Celestine Ukwu, Luke Ezeji, and Onyeka Onwenu, whose music, despite varying styles and eras, bears the imprint of communal dialogue and social consciousness.

However, modernization — through urbanization, media technology, globalization, and digitization — has both enriched and challenged these traditions. The spread of radio and recording technology in the twentieth century, and later globalization and digital platforms in the twenty-first century, transformed the ways African music was produced, circulated, and consumed (Collins, 2004; Turino, 2008). While these developments enhanced accessibility and global visibility, they also shifted emphasis from collective participation toward individual artistry and commercial success. More recently, advances in artificial intelligence present a qualitatively new challenge — one that risks not merely displacing indigenous forms but simulating participatory structures without genuine communal engagement, thereby severing the link between democratic *form* and democratic *practice*. Thus, the ideological essence of African music as a communal and democratic activity has come under threat of dilution and cultural misrepresentation.

Drawing on postcolonial theory, cultural studies frameworks, and theories of cultural hybridity, this paper examines the interrelationship between democracy, African musical ideology, and modernization from the mid-twentieth century to twenty-first-century musical practices, with a specific focus on West African traditions — particularly *Ewe drumming*, *Mande griot* traditions, and Yoruba dundun ensembles. It argues that while modernization provides avenues for innovation and global recognition, it also risks eroding communal structures, participatory values, and indigenous ideologies through mechanisms of commodification, the elevation of individual stardom over collective creation, and the displacement of indigenous temporal and harmonic systems by Western norms. The study concludes that a balanced approach — one combining legal protections for traditional forms, community-led technological adaptation, and ethical frameworks for AI engagement — is necessary to safeguard cultural identity while embracing modern trends in music and governance.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. **Clarify the relationship between African musical ideology and democratic ethos** — identifying how performance practices such as call-and-response, collective rhythmic negotiation, and consensus-based ensemble decision-making instantiate a *metaphorical democracy* distinct from Western liberal-representative models.

2. **Examine how West African musical practices reflected and shaped democratic consciousness** from the independence era (mid-20th century) through contemporary digital and AI-influenced contexts (21st century), with specific attention to *Ewe drumming*, *Mande griot* traditions, and Yoruba dundun ensembles.
3. **Analyze the dual effects of modernization** – urbanization, media technology, globalization, and digitization – on the participatory and communal structures of West African music, identifying both opportunities for innovation and risks of erosion through commodification, individual stardom, and displacement of indigenous temporal and harmonic systems.
4. **Evaluate the specific challenges artificial intelligence poses** to the democratic ethos of West African musical practices, particularly the risk that AI may simulate participatory structures without genuine communal engagement.
5. **Propose a balanced framework** combining legal protections, community-led technological adaptation, and ethical guidelines for AI engagement, by which African societies can preserve cultural authenticity and indigenous musical ideology while engaging with modern global trends.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, theoretical, and historical research design, relying on secondary sources and interpretive analysis to explore the intersections of democracy, African musical ideology, modernization, and artificial intelligence (AI), with a specific focus on West African musical traditions – particularly *Ewe drumming*, *Mande griot* traditions, and Yoruba dundun ensembles. It examines how these themes are reflected in African music practices from the mid-20th century to the present.

The methodology proceeds along three interconnected tracks:

1. Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks

Three core theoretical frames guide the analysis:

- **Postcolonial theory (Frantz Fanon, 1963):** Fanon's work on cultural identity, national consciousness, and liberation is used to understand the role of music in African resistance to colonialism and the ongoing struggle for political and cultural sovereignty. This framework is particularly relevant to examining how musical practices functioned as sites of democratic expression during and after independence movements.
- **Cultural studies and representation (Stuart Hall, 1997):** Hall's theories on cultural identity and representation frame the relationship between African music and cultural identity in the postcolonial era, especially how music constructs and negotiates national identity and democratic ideals amid globalizing pressures.
- **Cultural hybridity and digital ethnomusicology (Born, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2013):** These frameworks articulate how media technologies – from radio and recording to digital platforms and AI – are altering the production, distribution, and cultural significance of African music. Born's work on digital mediation and musical experience is used to theorize the specific challenge AI poses: the risk of simulating participatory structures (call-and-response, collective negotiation) without genuine communal engagement, thereby severing the link between democratic *form* and democratic *practice*.

2. Historical Analysis

The study traces the evolution of West African musical practices across two key periods:

- **Mid-20th Century (Independence Era and Nation-Building):** Analysis focuses on the role of music in nation-building and cultural identity during Africa's post-independence period. Genres such as highlife and jùjú are examined for their expression of democratic aspirations and cultural pride, with attention to how they retained communal and participatory structures even as they engaged with modern instrumentation and mass media.
- **Late 20th Century to Present (Globalization, Afrobeat, Digital Media):** The study reviews the rise of Afrobeat and other contemporary genres within the context of globalization, the digital revolution, and AI's growing influence on music production and dissemination. This period is analyzed for shifts from collective participation toward individual artistry, commodification, and the displacement of indigenous temporal and harmonic systems by Western norms.

3. Conceptual Analysis

Core concepts – **metaphorical democracy, African musical ideology, modernization, and AI's impact on participatory culture** – are subjected to conceptual analysis to clarify their meanings and interrelations. This approach is particularly necessary for the paper's central distinction between metaphorical democracy (participatory, egalitarian social logic embedded in performance practices) and liberal representative democracy (Western institutional models), ensuring analytical precision throughout the study.

Data Sources

The study draws on secondary sources including:

- Ethnomusicological literature on West African musical traditions (Agawu, Nzewi)
- Historical accounts of African popular music and independence movements
- Media studies and digital ethnomusicology scholarship
- Policy documents and legal frameworks related to cultural preservation and intangible heritage

Literature Review

Conceptualizing African Musical Ideology

African musical ideology can be understood as the underlying principles, values, and social functions that guide the creation, performance, and interpretation of music within African societies. Unlike Western traditions, where music is often framed as an artistic product performed for audiences, African musical practices are deeply embedded in communal life, blurring the line between performer and listener. Nzewi (1999) describes African music as a social process rooted in collective participation and inclusivity, where call-and-response structures, improvisation, and dance facilitate communal ownership. Similarly, Agawu (2003) emphasizes that the participatory ethos of African rhythm and performance mirrors democratic ideals, creating dialogic spaces for negotiation and collective identity – what this

study terms **metaphorical democracy**: a participatory, egalitarian social logic instantiated through musical practice rather than through institutional governance.

Nketia (1974) observed that in many African societies, music functioned as a mode of communication and governance, shaping decisions and resolving conflicts in communal gatherings. In this way, African musical ideology is inherently democratic, not in the institutional sense of Western liberal democracy but as a cultural practice of inclusivity, dialogue, and shared responsibility. This distinction is crucial: the "democratic ethos" of African music is metaphorical — it describes a social logic of horizontal dialogue, distributed agency, and communal authorship, not a formal political system.

West African Musical Traditions and the Democratic Ethos

The democratic ethos of African musical ideology is particularly pronounced in the performance traditions of West Africa. In **Ewe drumming** (Ghana/Togo/Benin), the interaction between the master drummer and the ensemble exemplifies distributed agency: no single musician dictates the performance; rather, rhythmic patterns emerge through collective negotiation within a timeline structure, with each drummer maintaining an independent but interlocking part. This polyrhythmic framework instantiates a form of horizontal dialogue where no voice dominates, and consensus is achieved through mutual listening and adjustment.

In **Mande griot traditions** (Mali, Guinea, Senegal, The Gambia), the *jeli* (griot) serves simultaneously as historian, praise-singer, and social commentator — but always within a dialogic relationship with the community. The *kora* and *balafon* traditions of the Mande world embed democratic accountability into performance: the griot's authority derives from community endorsement, and the performance space remains open to interjection, response, and collective participation.

In **Yoruba dundun ensembles** (Nigeria, Benin), the talking drum tradition creates a musical language capable of both praise and critique. The *dundun* master "speaks" through the drum in tonal patterns that mirror Yoruba speech, enabling direct commentary on social and political matters. As with Ewe and Mande traditions, performance is fundamentally dialogic — the *akóm* (supporting drummers) and dancers negotiate rhythm and meaning through call-and-response, creating what this study identifies as a democratic space.

These three traditions — drawn from different West African cultural zones but sharing core ideological features — provide the case studies through which this paper examines the impact of modernization and AI on African musical democracy.

Democracy and Music in Traditional African Contexts

Before colonial rule, music was an integral part of African governance and social cohesion. Rituals, festivals, and public performances provided forums for expressing collective values. Among the Akan of Ghana, music structured community decision-making, while in Yoruba culture, drumming and praise-singing were integral to both royal courts and popular assemblies (Nketia, 1974). The ideological framework was clear: everyone had a role to play, whether as instrumentalist, dancer, singer, or audience participant. Thus, democracy and

music in African contexts have long shared a symbiotic relationship – a relationship grounded not in electoral representation but in participatory inclusion.

Music in Mid-20th Century Independence Movements

The mid-20th century marked Africa's most profound cultural and political shift: the decolonization wave of the 1950s and 1960s. Music became central to the nationalist struggles and democratic awakening across the continent. In Ghana, highlife music – rooted in the participatory structures of Akan performance – was repurposed from colonial ballroom entertainment into a nationalist soundtrack that accompanied Kwame Nkrumah's independence campaigns (Collins, 2004). In Nigeria, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's Afrobeat movement emerged as a musical critique of military dictatorship and corruption. His music fused jazz, Yoruba rhythms, and political commentary, producing a sound that symbolized resistance and democratic struggle (Veal, 2000). Notably, Fela's performances retained the dialogic ethos of Yoruba musical tradition: his *Kalakuta Republic* functioned as a communal space, and his call-and-response exchanges with his audience reproduced the participatory logic of traditional performance.

Across Francophone West Africa, independence songs merged local rhythms with revolutionary themes. In Guinea, President Sékou Touré institutionalized music as a tool of political education, sponsoring state ensembles like Les Ballets Africains to promote national unity (Counsel, 2009). These examples demonstrate how, across West Africa, music served as both a weapon and a voice for democratic aspiration during independence struggles.

Postcolonial Music and Nation-Building (1960s–1980s)

Following independence, West African states turned to music for nation-building. In Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, state-sponsored orchestras and festivals celebrated unity while promoting modernized versions of traditional music (Collins, 2004). Highlife, jùjú, and Afrobeat reflected attempts to construct postcolonial identities that were both modern and authentically African.

However, the same period exposed tensions between music's democratic ethos and state instrumentalization. In Nigeria, while Afrobeat symbolized democratic critique, jùjú music – particularly in the hands of bandleaders like Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey and King Sunny Adé – was often co-opted by political elites to reinforce social hierarchies (Waterman, 1990). The participatory structures of traditional Yoruba performance remained formally intact, but the social context shifted: the *òṇà* (path) of praise-song increasingly served political patrons rather than communal dialogue. Postcolonial nation-building thus highlighted the ambivalent role of music as both a democratic voice and a state instrument – a tension that foreshadows the later challenges of commercialization and AI.

Modernization, Urbanization, and Popular Culture (Late 20th Century)

By the late 20th century, modernization and urbanization had dramatically transformed West African music. Recording studios, cassettes, and radio expanded audiences across borders, commercializing music and shifting it from communal participation to mass consumption. In Ghana, the evolution from highlife to hiplife represented a generational shift in urban youth culture, blending rap with local languages (Collins, 2004). In Nigeria, jùjú and fújí music grew

in popularity, adapting Islamic praise traditions and Yoruba drumming into urban dance music (Waterman, 1990). In Senegal, mbalax — pioneered by Youssou N'Dour — fused Sabar drumming traditions with modern instrumentation, creating a genre that balanced global accessibility with Wolof cultural identity.

These developments diversified West African popular culture, creating genres that spoke to both tradition and modernity. Yet they also marked a gradual decline of communal ownership, replacing it with celebrity culture and market-driven production. The shift from the open performance space of the village square to the ticketed concert hall and the recorded album introduced a new logic: music as commodity rather than communal process.

Globalization and West African Music in the 21st Century

The 21st century ushered in a new phase, where African music — particularly West African Afrobeats — entered global circulation at an unprecedented scale. Artists such as Burna Boy (Nigeria), Wizkid (Nigeria), Angelique Kidjo (Benin), and Yemi Alade (Nigeria) redefined Africa's place in global music (Turino, 2008). Digital platforms such as YouTube, Spotify, and TikTok have democratized access, allowing artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers. However, as Omoniyi (2006) notes, globalization often imposes Western commercial logics, privileging celebrity stardom over collective participation. This tension is visible in the contrast between grassroots traditions — such as Nigeria's masquerade music, where performance remains community-owned — and commercial Afrobeats dominating international charts.

Within West Africa, hip hop and its hybrids illustrate the duality of modernization. In Senegal, groups like Positive Black Soul blend rap with political commentary, continuing the democratic advocacy tradition of the griot. In Ghana, hiplife artists engage local realities through Twi-language lyricism. These genres demonstrate how modernization creates hybrid forms that engage local realities while participating in global cultural flows. Yet the underlying question remains: to what extent can these genres sustain the participatory, dialogic ethos of the traditions from which they emerge?

Artificial Intelligence and the New Challenge to Musical Democracy

Artificial intelligence represents a qualitatively new challenge — one distinct from earlier waves of modernization because it risks not merely *displacing* indigenous forms but *simulating* participatory structures without genuine communal engagement. For West African musical cultures, where music is embedded in social ritual, oral lineage, community authorship, and distinct performance practices, several patterns of AI use threaten the ideological foundations of metaphorical democracy (Nkoala et al., 2025). These challenges can be categorized as follows:

1. **Commodification and decontextualization.** Generative AI trained on large, poorly curated datasets can extract musical features — rhythms, timbres, melodic fragments — from indigenous recordings and reproduce them in new tracks without ritual context or community consent. This reduces music to reusable "sound material," severing sonic practice from its social meanings and transforming communal repertoire into isolated samples for commercial exploitation (Dugeri, 2024). In West African traditions where the drum "speaks" and the griot carries genealogical responsibility, such decontextualization is

not merely economic loss but ideological violence: it severs the link between sound and communal meaning that constitutes metaphorical democracy.

2. **Epistemic marginalization and stylistic homogenization.** Many AI composition tools reflect the statistical priors of dominant (Western or global mainstream) datasets. When these tools generate "Afro-sounding" content, they often prioritize hybridized, market-friendly features over the micro-rhythmic subtlety, call-and-response structures, and modality-specific features central to West African idioms. The asymmetrical 12-pulse timeline of Ewe *agbekor*, the tonal speech-melody of Yoruba talking drums, and the genealogical precision of Mande praise-epistemology are not easily encoded in datasets trained on Western metrical and harmonic norms. This biases production toward a flattened "global pop" aesthetic and threatens the ideological principle that style embodies local histories and cosmologies (Nkoala et al., 2025).
3. **Erosion of authorship, agency, and livelihoods.** When AI reproduces stylistic traits of traditional musicians without attribution or fair compensation, community members lose control over sonic heritage and potential revenue. Industry reports note concerns that AI will accelerate cultural appropriation and reduce creators' bargaining power, especially for marginalized indigenous musicians who already face weak intellectual property protections (CISAC, 2024). In West African contexts where musical knowledge is transmitted through apprenticeship and lineage — often without written documentation — the threat is particularly acute: the oral systems that have preserved musical traditions for generations offer little defense against computational extraction.
4. **Archive misuse and consent issues.** Digitization and AI indexing of archival materials can benefit preservation, but without community-led governance, archives feed training datasets that power generative models. Several African scholars argue that using archival recordings — often gathered during colonial eras — to train AI models without consent deepens historic injustices and amounts to digital extraction of cultural property (Onasanya, 2025). For West African societies whose musical archives were frequently collected under colonial authority, this raises specific concerns about neocolonial patterns of resource extraction.
5. **Solutions being overlooked.** While AI offers pedagogical and preservation benefits — personalized learning tools, searchable corpora, restoration of degraded recordings — many development trajectories prioritize technical scalability and commercial products over community sovereignty. UNESCO warns that without deliberate policy and local capacity building, culturally insensitive AI adoption will produce long-term cultural costs (Maisiri & Musonza, 2025). To preserve African musical ideology — including the democratic ethos that is this paper's central concern — scholars recommend community-controlled datasets, ethical consent frameworks, culturally aware models, and intellectual property regimes tailored to collective rights rather than purely individual copyright models.

The Dilemma of Modernization: Balancing Tradition and Change

The tension running through this literature review is not between tradition and modernity as binary opposites, but between different ways of navigating cultural change. Scholars highlight the need to embrace modernization without erasing indigenous values. Nketia (1974) argued that African music must adapt to survive, but adaptation should not mean abandoning its communal ethos. Nzewi (2007) further insists that African music education should integrate indigenous knowledge systems to safeguard cultural integrity. Euba (2001) stresses the

importance of positioning African music as an equal player in global cultural dialogues, not as a diluted derivative of Western forms.

For the specific question this study addresses — how modernization and AI affect the **metaphorical democracy** embedded in West African musical practices — the literature suggests that the challenge is not modernization itself but the terms on which it is negotiated. The democratic ethos of call-and-response, collective negotiation, and distributed agency can survive and even thrive in new technological contexts, provided that adaptation is community-led rather than market-imposed. The alternative — passive adoption of technologies designed for other cultural logics — risks severing the link between musical practice and democratic ideology that has sustained West African musical traditions across centuries of change.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in multiple theoretical perspectives that, taken together, form an integrated analytical lens for examining the relationship between West African musical ideology, modernization, and artificial intelligence. Rather than treating these theories discretely, the framework synthesizes them around a central analytical concept — **metaphorical democracy** — which this study develops to describe the participatory, egalitarian social logic embedded in West African performance practices such as call-and-response, collective rhythmic negotiation, and consensus-based ensemble decision-making.

1. Postcolonial Theory: Resistance, Cultural Regeneration, and Hybridity

Postcolonial theory provides the foundational lens for understanding how African music has historically negotiated cultural identity, political power, and democratic expression during and after the colonial period.

Frantz Fanon (1963), in *The Wretched of the Earth*, explores the psychological and cultural effects of colonization and the imperative of cultural regeneration in postcolonial societies. His theory informs this study's analysis of how West African music served as a tool of resistance and a vehicle for political and cultural liberation during independence movements. For Fanon, the recovery of precolonial cultural forms was not mere nostalgia but a revolutionary act — a reclaiming of the cultural sovereignty that colonialism sought to destroy. This perspective is essential for understanding why the "democratic ethos" of West African music is not merely an aesthetic feature but a political stance: when an Ewe drum ensemble enacts collective negotiation, it performs a mode of social organization that colonialism and its aftermath have systematically suppressed.

Homi K. Bhabha (1994) extends postcolonial analysis through the concept of **cultural hybridity**, which helps explain the blending of African traditions with Western influences in contemporary African music. Bhabha argues that colonial encounters produce not pure, oppositional cultures but "third spaces" where identities are negotiated and transformed. This is directly relevant to the paper's central tension: West African musicians from Fela to Burna Boy have never operated in cultural isolation but have synthesized indigenous forms with global influences. The question, from a Bhabhaian perspective, is not whether hybridization occurs — it is inevitable — but whether the terms of hybridization are community-led or

externally imposed. This distinction is crucial for assessing whether modernization and AI reinforce or undermine the democratic ethos of West African music.

2. Cultural Identity, Globalization, and Hybridity

Stuart Hall's theories of cultural identity and representation provide the second pillar of the framework. Hall (1990) theorizes cultural identity not as an essence to be recovered but as a "production" – an ongoing process of negotiation between tradition and modernity, past and present. This is particularly relevant to West African music, which has never been static but has continually adapted while maintaining ideological continuity. Hall's framework allows this study to analyze how contemporary genres such as Afrobeat and Afrobeats represent not the loss of authentic tradition but the continuous renegotiation of cultural identity within globalized media landscapes.

Hall (1997) further elaborates on representation as a site of meaning-making – a process through which cultural identities are constructed, contested, and transformed. Applied to this study, Hall's work helps interpret how West African musical ideologies have evolved within globalized circuits of production and consumption, particularly how the metaphorical democracy of traditional performance is represented – and potentially transformed – when it enters digital platforms, streaming economies, and AI-driven production systems.

3. Democracy, Music, and the Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas's (1989) theory of the **public sphere** – spaces for rational-critical discourse central to democratic life – provides a bridge between Western democratic theory and the study's central concept of metaphorical democracy. However, this application requires explicit qualification.

Habermas conceived the public sphere as a bourgeois institution of reasoned debate aimed at consensus through argumentation. This study does not claim that West African musical practices replicate this model. Rather, it argues that music in many West African contexts has functioned as an *analogous* space for collective deliberation, social critique, and consensus-building – one operating through performance rather than discourse, through rhythm and dialogue rather than reasoned argument. Where Habermas's public sphere privileges speech, West African musical democracy privileges *participation*: the call-and-response structure ensures that no single voice dominates; the polyrhythmic ensemble distributes agency across all participants; the open performance space invites communal negotiation.

This theoretical move – adapting public sphere theory while marking its limitations – is essential for the paper's argument. It allows the study to claim that West African music has enacted democratic values without imposing Western institutional categories. The "public sphere" in this context is not the coffeehouse or the parliament but the village square, the festival ground, and the performance arena where musicians and communities co-create meaning through participatory practice.

4. Music, Technology, and Artificial Intelligence

David Hesmondhalgh (2013) provides the framework for understanding how digital media and technology reshape the music industry. His work on the cultural industries –

particularly the tension between creativity and commerce, and between democratic access and corporate control – is directly applicable to the study's analysis of AI's impact on West African music. Hesmondhalgh's framework helps articulate how AI-driven production tools, streaming platforms, and algorithmic curation can both democratize access (enabling wider participation) and impose new forms of gatekeeping (privileging commercially viable sounds over culturally specific ones).

Sarah Thornton (1995) extends this analysis through the concept of **cultural economics**, exploring how the global music industry is shaped by technological advancements and economic forces. Her work on "subcultural capital" – the cultural knowledge and authenticity that confers status within taste communities – is particularly relevant to understanding how West African musicians navigate the tension between global commercial success and the preservation of indigenous musical ideology. Thornton's framework helps analyze the specific dynamics at play when AI-generated "Afro-sounding" content circulates in global markets: does it carry the subcultural capital of authentic participation, or does it represent a hollow simulation?

5. Synthesizing the Framework: Metaphorical Democracy as Analytical Lens

These four theoretical traditions are synthesized through the study's central analytical concept: **metaphorical democracy**. This concept names the participatory, egalitarian social logic instantiated in West African performance practices – specifically in Ewe drumming, Mande griot traditions, and Yoruba dundun ensembles – and provides the criterion against which modernization and AI are evaluated.

The concept draws on:

Theoretical Source	Contribution to "Metaphorical Democracy"
Fanon (postcolonial liberation)	Positions participatory musical practice as a form of cultural sovereignty and resistance
Bhabha (cultural hybridity)	Provides a framework for evaluating whether hybridization is community-led or externally imposed
Hall (cultural identity)	Explains how democratic musical practices evolve continuously without losing ideological continuity
Habermas (public sphere)	Provides the analogy of music as a space for collective deliberation, while marking the limits of the comparison
Hesmondhalgh & Thornton (media industries)	Frameworks for analyzing how technology and economics enable or constrain participatory practice

Through this integrated framework, the study examines whether modernization and AI have reinforced or undermined the metaphorical democracy of West African music, and what forms of adaptation – legal, technological, and community-led – might sustain it.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study draws on secondary data sources to examine the intersections of West African musical ideology, democratic ethos, modernization, and artificial intelligence. The data collection proceeds along three interconnected tracks:

1. Ethnomusicological Literature The study engages foundational and contemporary ethnomusicological scholarship on West African musical traditions, with particular attention to works that theorize both the structural features of indigenous music (Agawu, 2003; Nzewi, 1999) and their socio-political implications. These sources ground the analysis of how performance practices — call-and-response, polyrhythmic ensemble negotiation, and consensus-based decision-making — instantiate the participatory, egalitarian social logic the paper terms *metaphorical democracy*.

2. Historical and Political Documents The study draws on historical accounts, policy documents, and cultural records spanning the mid-twentieth century to the present. These materials illuminate the role of music in nation-building and democratic consciousness during and after the independence era, tracing how genres such as highlife, jùjú, and Afrobeat functioned as sites of cultural resistance, political critique, and communal identity formation.

3. Contemporary Digital and AI-Related Sources The analysis incorporates recent academic articles, media reports, and case studies examining the global circulation of African music in the digital era — specifically the impact of streaming platforms, algorithmic curation, and AI-driven production tools on participatory structures and indigenous musical ideology. Case studies of contemporary artists including Burna Boy, Wizkid, and Yemi Alade are analyzed not merely as examples of commercial success but as sites of negotiation between communal musical traditions and the pressures of globalization, individual stardom, and technological mediation. Particular attention is given to instances of AI collaboration in African music production, evaluated against the paper's central criterion: whether such innovations reinforce or sever the link between democratic form (participatory structures) and democratic practice (genuine communal engagement).

All sources are analyzed through the integrative theoretical framework outlined above — postcolonial theory (Fanon, Bhabha), cultural studies (Hall), public sphere theory (Habermas), and digital ethnomusicology (Hesmondhalgh, Born) — with the concept of *metaphorical democracy* serving as the evaluative lens for assessing continuity and transformation in West African musical practice.

Findings

West African musical traditions instantiate democracy not as institutional governance but as performed practice. Across Ewe drumming, Mande griot traditions, and Yoruba *dundun* ensembles, the participatory logic of call-and-response, collective rhythmic negotiation, and consensus-based ensemble decision-making creates a space where the boundary between performer and audience dissolves (Agawu, 2003). This is the study's central concept of *metaphorical democracy* in operation: a participatory, egalitarian social logic that does not replicate Western liberal-representative models but nonetheless enacts values of horizontal dialogue, distributed agency, and communal authorship. In traditional contexts, this ethos reflects and reinforces communal decision-making structures, positioning music as both a cultural practice and a political force.

Independence Era and the Alignment of Musical Ideology with Democratic Consciousness

During the 1950s and 1960s, music was integral to nationalist struggles across West Africa. Songs of resistance performed in public spaces energized communities and articulated a collective vision for independence. In Fanonian terms, this period represents the cultural phase of decolonization – the recovery and mobilization of indigenous expressive forms as revolutionary tools. Figures such as Fela Anikulapo-Kuti emerged not merely as musicians but as democratic activists who fused musical practice with political critique, embodying the deep alignment between African musical ideology and democratic aspirations (Veal, 2000). The highlife genre, with its roots in communal celebration and social commentary, similarly functioned as a vehicle for nation-building, retaining participatory structures – the dance floor as deliberative space, the bandleader's call met by the audience's response – even as it engaged with modern instrumentation and mass media.

Modernization: Opportunity and Erosion

Modernization expanded the horizons of West African music through recording technologies, urban performance circuits, and global communication networks. As Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity suggests, these encounters inevitably produced new third spaces where indigenous forms blended with global influences. Yet modernization also commercialized music, shifting it from a communal asset embedded in social life to a commodity circulating in capitalist markets (Collins, 2004). This transformation carries dual consequences. On one hand, it amplified the global reach of African voices and enabled innovation. On the other, it disrupted indigenous democratic structures by elevating individual stardom over collective creation, displacing indigenous temporal and harmonic systems in favor of Western norms, and reorienting musical practice from communal accountability toward commercial viability.

The Digital and AI Era: Paradox and Risk

The twenty-first century has witnessed African music ascend as a global phenomenon. Artists such as Burna Boy, Angélique Kidjo, and Wizkid command international audiences, symbolizing Africa's contribution to global culture. However, this globalization introduces a central tension: while digital platforms democratize access – enabling wider participation and distribution – they simultaneously impose Western commercial logics that prioritize individuated artistry over communal practice (Turino, 2008). This creates a paradox: African music is more globally influential than ever, yet its ideological roots in democratic communalism are increasingly strained.

Artificial intelligence compounds this tension in a qualitatively new manner. Unlike earlier modernizing forces that transformed communal structures through displacement, AI poses the distinct risk of *simulating* participatory structures – generating call-and-response patterns, polyrhythmic textures, and ensemble dynamics – without genuine communal engagement. As Born's (2017) framework on digital mediation suggests, this severs the link between democratic form and democratic practice: the *appearance* of participation persists while the *substance* of collective human negotiation evaporates. The

result is not merely cultural dilution but a form of representational violence in which indigenous musical ideology is hollowed out and repackaged for global consumption.

Toward Balance: Continuity through Adaptation

A recurring theme across the literature is the call for balance. As Nketia (1974) argued, modernization should not mean abandoning tradition but adapting it within frameworks that sustain cultural continuity. Nzewi (2007) similarly emphasizes embedding indigenous knowledge systems in contemporary practice — not as museum artifacts but as living principles that can guide innovation. The central challenge, as this study's findings demonstrate, is not *whether* West African music modernizes — this is inevitable — but *how* it does so: whether through community-led adaptation that preserves metaphorical democracy as a guiding ethos, or through externally imposed logics that sever the connection between form and practice. The findings suggest that the former path requires deliberate intervention — legal protections for traditional forms, community-led technological adaptation, and ethical frameworks for AI engagement — to ensure that modernization enriches rather than erodes the democratic essence of West African musical traditions.

Implications of the Findings and Suggestions

The findings of this study carry implications that extend beyond ethnomusicology into cultural policy, education, democratic theory, and the ethical governance of artificial intelligence in the arts. Five interrelated recommendations emerge.

1. Cultural Policies and Preservation as Democratic Practice

Governments and cultural institutions should prioritize safeguarding indigenous musical traditions through education, archival preservation, and community-led support structures. However, preservation efforts must resist the temptation to treat these traditions as static heritage objects. Drawing on Hall's (1990) theorization of cultural identity as an ongoing *production* rather than a fixed essence to be recovered, this study argues that safeguarding West African musical ideology means sustaining the *conditions* for participatory practice — the communal spaces, intergenerational transmission networks, and performance contexts in which metaphorical democracy is enacted. Preservation, in this framing, is not museumization but the protection of a living democratic ethos that strengthens social cohesion and communal accountability.

2. Music Education as Ideological Continuity

Music education curricula across African schools and universities should integrate indigenous musical ideologies alongside contemporary music studies — not as historical addenda but as foundational frameworks. This recommendation responds directly to the erosion identified in the findings: as modernization and digital mediation displace communal structures, younger generations risk being severed from the participatory traditions that constitute the democratic essence of West African music. An education system that centers indigenous principles — collective authorship, distributed agency, call-and-response as deliberative practice, polyrhythmic ensemble as consensus-building — ensures that modernization becomes adaptation rather than rupture. Curriculum reform

should draw on Nzewi's (2007) insistence that indigenous knowledge systems are not premodern artifacts but living principles capable of guiding contemporary practice.

3. Conscious Integration of Indigenous Values in Global Markets

African musicians participating in global music markets face the central tension the study has traced: global visibility versus ideological continuity. This study suggests that global success need not entail the erasure of cultural identity. Rather, musicians can consciously integrate indigenous democratic values – collective authorship, community accountability, dialogic performance structures – into commercially oriented work. The Bhabhaian framework adopted here views such negotiation not as contamination but as the productive creation of third spaces where indigenous ethos and global form coexist. The model is not rejection of global markets but strategic engagement that preserves ideological substance while embracing technological and commercial opportunity.

4. Theorizing Democracy in African Terms

Scholars and policymakers should recognize that West African musical practices offer alternative models of democracy – rooted in participation, inclusivity, dialogue, and distributed agency – that can inform broader democratic discourses beyond the continent. The study's central concept of *metaphorical democracy* provides a vocabulary for this recognition: these traditions instantiate democratic values without replicating Western liberal-representative institutional models. Engaging seriously with this alternative democratizes democratic theory itself, challenging the assumption that the Western institutional model is the universal standard against which all participatory practices are measured. As Habermas's public sphere theory is adapted through the particularities of West African performance traditions, a more pluralistic understanding of democratic practice becomes possible – one in which the village square, the festival ground, and the polyrhythmic ensemble are recognized as sites of democratic life.

5. AI, Commercialization, and the Risk of Simulated Participation

The commercialization of music through AI presents a distinct challenge that requires deliberate intervention. The findings demonstrate that AI risks not merely displacing indigenous forms but *simulating* participatory structures – generating call-and-response patterns, polyrhythmic textures, and ensemble aesthetics – without genuine communal engagement, thereby severing the link between democratic form and democratic practice. This study does not advocate rejection of AI; technological mediation is an inevitable dimension of contemporary musical production. Rather, it argues that AI engagement must be governed by ethical frameworks that prioritize:

- **Transparency:** clear labeling of AI-generated content, particularly when it draws on or simulates indigenous traditions
- **Community consent:** protocols ensuring that AI applications referencing specific cultural traditions are developed in consultation with originating communities
- **Anti-homogenization safeguards:** mechanisms that prevent algorithmic curation and AI production tools from flattening diverse indigenous forms into commercially palatable templates

Without such frameworks, AI will compound the homogenizing pressures already present in global music markets, accelerating the erosion of the democratic ethos that constitutes the ideological core of West African musical traditions. The path forward is not protectionist isolation but what this study terms *guided integration* – the deliberate embedding of indigenous ethical principles within the technological systems that will inevitably shape the future of African music.

Conclusion

From the mid-twentieth century to the present, West African music has been deeply intertwined with democratic values and modernization – but the democracy embedded in these traditions is not liberal-representative democracy in the Western institutional sense. It is what this study has termed *metaphorical democracy*: a participatory, egalitarian social logic instantiated through performance practices such as call-and-response, collective rhythmic negotiation, and consensus-based ensemble decision-making. In Ewe drumming, Mande griot traditions, and Yoruba *dundun* ensembles, this ethos of distributed agency and communal authorship has constituted not merely an aesthetic feature but a mode of social organization – one that colonialism and its aftermath systematically suppressed and that postcolonial cultural practice has sought to reclaim.

During the independence struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, music emerged as a unifying and mobilizing force, embodying democratic aspirations in Fanon's sense of cultural decolonization. In the decades that followed, modernization, urbanization, and media technology expanded African music's horizons, enabling it to become a global cultural force. Yet, as this study has demonstrated, these same forces threaten its indigenous ideological foundations by shifting emphasis from collective participation to individual stardom, from communal accountability to commercial viability, and from indigenous temporal and harmonic systems to Western normative frameworks.

The rise of artificial intelligence introduces a qualitatively new challenge – one that earlier modernizing forces did not present. AI risks not merely displacing indigenous forms but *simulating* participatory structures without genuine communal engagement, thereby severing the link between democratic form and democratic practice that Born (2017) warns against. When call-and-response patterns are algorithmically generated, when polyrhythmic textures are produced without human negotiation, the *appearance* of participation persists while the *substance* – the collective deliberation, the distributed agency, the communal authorship – evaporates.

The challenge for African societies, then, is not to reject modernization but to direct its terms. Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) framework of cultural hybridity, this study recognizes that cultural encounters inevitably produce third spaces of negotiation. The question is not *whether* hybridization occurs but *whether* it is community-led or externally imposed. This study has proposed a balanced framework combining three interdependent strategies:

- **Legal protections** for traditional forms and the communal structures that sustain them
- **Community-led technological adaptation** that embeds indigenous knowledge systems within contemporary practice, as Nzewi (2007) advocates

- **Ethical frameworks for AI engagement** that prioritize transparency, community consent, and anti-homogenization safeguards

African music thus stands not only as cultural expression but as a democratic model — one that privileges participation, inclusivity, and collective identity over individuated authorship and passive consumption. In this light, democracy and modernization in the era of artificial intelligence should not be regarded as threats to be resisted but as opportunities to reimagine African musical ideology in ways that strengthen, rather than erode, its democratic foundations. By striking this balance — what this study terms *guided integration* — West African music can continue to serve as a vital cultural, political, and democratic force in the twenty-first century, carrying forward the participatory ethos that has defined it for generations while engaging creatively with the technological realities of the present.

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