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ETHNOMUSICOLOGY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: PRESERVING AND REINTERPRETING AFRICAN INDIGENOUS SOUNDS THROUGH DIGITAL ARCHIVES

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Abstract

Digital technology has significantly shaped the evolution of ethnomusicology in the twenty-first century, transforming how music is recorded, preserved, studied, and shared. African indigenous music, which traditionally relies on oral transmission, collective memory, and direct engagement with cultural custodians, is increasingly vulnerable as these knowledge holders age and pass on. This underscores the urgent need for sustainable preservation strategies. The study explores how digitalisation projects, digital archives, and virtual ethnographic methods are redefining the study of African traditional music in the digital era. It highlights the role of metadata-driven archives, online repositories, and audio-visual documentation in ensuring long-term accessibility and safeguarding endangered musical traditions. Furthermore, it examines how digital archives support academic research, enhance intergenerational knowledge transfer, and enable creative reinterpretations of musical forms. The study also addresses ethical concerns relating to cultural ownership, representation, and consent, arguing that culturally sensitive and ethically grounded digital practices are essential for preserving Africa's musical heritage in a globalised world.

Keywords: *ethnomusicology, twenty-first century, preserving, digital archive, re-interpreting indigenous sounds*

1. Introduction and Background to the Study

Ethnomusicology focuses on understanding music as a human activity that is deeply connected to cultural, social, and historical life. Rather than seeing music as an isolated art form, it

examines how music relates to people, meaning, and everyday experiences (Merriam, 1964). This perspective is especially important in African societies, where music is not only for entertainment but also a key means of communication, identity formation, and social organisation. As a multidisciplinary field, ethnomusicology studies the relationship between sound, culture, and society. It places musical practices within the lived experiences of communities and shows how music helps create, share, and sustain social meaning (Merriam, 1964; Nettl, 2015). In African contexts, scholars emphasise that music both reflects and shapes social life, cultural continuity, and collective identity (Aluede & Igbi, 2025).

In many African communities, music is part of daily life and is closely tied to important events such as birth, initiation, marriage, governance, worship, and death. These musical practices serve practical, symbolic, and spiritual purposes, helping to maintain cultural values and social cohesion (Nketia, 1974; Udoh, 2024). Through song texts, rhythms, and group participation, music becomes a powerful way of preserving history, teaching moral values, and passing knowledge from one generation to another. Indigenous musical traditions therefore act as important sources of cultural knowledge. They carry beliefs, values, and worldviews, allowing communities to express their identity while adapting to change. Studies across Africa show that performance traditions often reflect shared history and social values. For example, musical forms such as Bòlòjò of Yewa land and Ekobe singing among the Enuani demonstrate how music communicates social expectations and preserves cultural memory (Adeola et al., 2025; Uche et al., 2025; Nwokolo & Efurhievwe, 2025).

Recent research also highlights a growing shift in African ethnomusicology toward reclaiming and promoting indigenous knowledge systems. This approach challenges colonial influences and supports the use of local musical practices as tools for cultural identity and expression (Ekpo, 2023). In this way, ethnomusicology not only documents music but also contributes to cultural renewal and identity building. African indigenous music also serves as a living record of history. Through songs, performance styles, and instruments, communities preserve stories of origin, migration, resistance, and continuity (Alayande, 2025). This knowledge is mainly passed down orally by elders and experienced musicians. However, this method of transmission makes indigenous music vulnerable, especially as many cultural custodians grow old and pass away. This situation highlights the urgent need for sustainable ways of preserving African musical traditions. Without proper documentation and support, valuable cultural knowledge may be lost. Against this background, this study is grounded in an ethnomusicological approach that views African indigenous music as both a social practice and a cultural archive. The aim of the paper is to present methods for preserving African musical and cultural heritage, and to contribute to ongoing discussions on cultural sustainability, identity, and the relevance of indigenous music in contemporary African society.

2. Methodology

Based on a critical examination of current ethnomusicological literature, digital archives, and heritage preservation theories pertaining to African indigenous music, this article employs a theoretical and archival framework (Merriam, 1964; Nettl, 2015). The study examines the implications of digital technology for the preservation, accessibility, and sustainability of African musical legacy by interacting with recorded sources and theoretical viewpoints rather than producing original empirical data. The relationship between orality digitisation, cultural

memory, and ethical responsibility in modern ethnomusicology is further examined using a conceptual method.

3. Theoretical and Archival Review

3.1 Ethnomusicology and Digital Preservation

Digital technology's quick development has opened up new avenues for ethnomusicological study, especially when it comes to recording and conserving indigenous musical traditions. Digital tools provide a revolutionary way to maintain cultural history in African cultures, where oral transmission and bodily performance have been the main means of preserving musical knowledge. In order to document musical sounds as well as the rich performance contexts, stories, and social meanings that go along with them, ethnomusicologists and cultural heritage experts increasingly use digital archives, online repositories, audio and video recording technology, and metadata tagging systems. Collaborative digital heritage projects and archive initiatives that concentrate on ethnographic music materials and living community knowledge around the continent demonstrate this trend. Beyond simple storage, digital ethnomusicology promotes global scholarly involvement, intergenerational transmission, and greater accessibility. Musical traditions that were previously only available through direct fieldwork or elder authority can now be studied, referenced, and disseminated across geographic borders thanks to digitised collections and digital repositories, enhancing cultural continuity. New initiatives in Africa, like multi-site digitisation and repatriation programmes that address ethical and technological issues, demonstrate how digital "return" and archive accessibility may benefit communities while protecting intangible cultural property.

Adoption of digital techniques, however, also necessitates culturally aware procedures that uphold the integrity of indigenous knowledge systems, community ownership, and permission. Instead of unintentionally commodifying or misrepresenting religious practices, research on digital preservation highlights that technology should promote sustainable, community-based involvement. In an increasingly digital environment, digital preservation must be viewed as a complementing framework that promotes ethical stewardship and cultural continuity rather than as a substitute for live performance practice.

3.2 African Indigenous Music: Forms and Functions

High levels of rhythmic complexity, polyrhythmic structuring, call-and-response frameworks, and improvisational flexibility are characteristics of African indigenous music that collectively constitute its musical language (Nketia, 1974; Agawu, 2003). In many African musical traditions, rhythm serves as the main structuring force. It frequently involves the simultaneous interaction of several rhythmic layers played by drums, vocals, and other instruments. According to Aluede (2014), this polyrhythmic framework reflects a social aesthetic in which interdependence and group participation, rather than individual talent, lead to the emergence of musical meaning.

Indigenous African musical performances usually combine dance, dramatic enactment, instrumental accompaniment, and vocal music into one expressive system. These components function as interconnected parts of performance rather than existing as distinct art forms, supporting the embodied and participatory aspect of music (Stone, 2005). Songs, chants, and instrumental discourse frequently use call-and-response frameworks that promote interaction

between leaders and groups, strengthening social cohesiveness and dialogic communication within communities (Agawu, 2003). The dynamic and flexible character of indigenous musical practice is further highlighted by improvisation, which enables performers to creatively adapt to social context, audience engagement, and ritual demands (Nettl, 2015).Additionally, African indigenous music shows how closely language and musical structure are related, especially in tone-language regions. Music can communicate linguistic meaning beyond text alone because melodic contours, rhythmic phrasing, and instrumental articulation frequently reflect speech patterns. Music can serve as a kind of coded communication because instruments like talking drums, xylophones, and lamellophones are purposefully made and played to mimic speech tonal inflections (Nketia, 1974; Aluede & Omoera, 2010). These instruments are built using culturally transmitted craftsmanship and localised ecological knowledge, further integrating music into indigenous knowledge systems.

Functionally, African indigenous music is essential for worship, social control, historical narration, ritual communication, and amusement. Major life-cycle events including birth, initiation, marriage, chieftaincy rites, and funerals are accompanied by music, which serves both utilitarian and symbolic functions within social organisation (Stone, 2005). Music facilitates contact with ancestors, deities, and supernatural forces in ritual and spiritual contexts by mediating interactions between the human and spiritual realms (Nketia, 1974). Music is an active agent of cultural continuity rather than a passive art form since songs and performance practices also work as vehicles for moral education, social critique, and the reinforcement of communal values (Agawu, 2003). These formal and functional features emphasise how important it is to document, analyse, and digitally portray African indigenous music using culturally sensitive methods. Conventional Western notation is unable to fully capture the core of indigenous musical systems since meaning is created through performance context, physical movement, language, and social interaction (Nettl, 2015). In order to respect indigenous epistemologies and maintain the integrity of African musical legacy in both traditional and digital contexts, effective documentation must incorporate sound, movement, narrative, and cultural context (Aluede, 2014).

3.3 Challenges in the Preservation of African Indigenous Music

African indigenous music's long-standing reliance on oral transmission and corporeal performance presents serious obstacles to its preservation. Because musical knowledge is passed down by social interaction, participation, and imitation rather than written documentation in many African communities, it is susceptible to disruption from urbanisation, generational differences, and shifting cultural priorities (Nketia, 1974; Akuno, 2016). Large chunks of musical repertories, performance techniques, and contextual knowledge run the risk of being permanently lost as older performers and tradition carriers pass away without rigorous documentation.

The degradation of early analog ethnographic recordings, many of which were created during the colonial and early postcolonial eras, exacerbates this problem. These recordings are particularly vulnerable to physical deterioration, technological obsolescence, and poor storage conditions since they are frequently kept on magnetic tapes, vinyl discs, or reel-to-reel formats (Seeger, 2002). Many sound collections in Africa are inaccessible or in danger due to inadequate funding and archival infrastructure, which raises concerns about the irreversible

loss of historically valuable musical resources (Schüller, 2010). In many African nations, research capacity is inconsistent and institutional resources are scarce, which further limits preservation efforts. The financial, technological, and human resources needed for extensive digitisation, metadata development, and long-term digital storage are often lacking in national archives, universities, and cultural institutions (Akuno, 2016). Because of this, important recordings and field notes frequently end up dispersed, uncatalogued, or in hazardous storage, which diminishes their value to communities and researchers alike.

Furthermore, African communities have historically been excluded from ownership, interpretation, and control of their cultural legacy due to colonial research frameworks that have determined the gathering and preservation of African music. Early ethnomusicological initiatives reinforced power disparities in knowledge creation and access by regularly removing recordings from their original communities and placing them in foreign archives (Agawu, 2003; Seeger, 2002). Indigenous epistemologies were suppressed by these practices, which also restricted community agency in decisions about the preservation, representation, and dissemination of music. When combined, these difficulties highlight how urgent it is to implement inclusive, sustainable, and morally sound preservation techniques. In order to preserve African indigenous music, community cooperation, shared custodianship, and culturally sensitive documentation are increasingly emphasised in contemporary studies (UNESCO, 2003; Akuno, 2016). Therefore, preservation must go beyond simple archival collection to strategies that uphold living traditions, respect community rights, and guarantee that African musical heritage is still relevant and available to both its original guardians and future generations.

3.4 Digitisation and Digital Archiving

In order to assure the long-term preservation, accessibility, and usability of analog musical materials, such as reel-to-reel tapes, cassettes, vinyl albums, pictures, and field notes, digitisation is the methodical process of turning them into digital formats (Schüller, 2010; Seeger, 2016). Digitisation has emerged as a key preservation tactic in modern ethnomusicology, especially for African indigenous music traditions whose documentation is mostly found in antiquated and brittle analog media. While reducing the dangers of physical deterioration, format obsolescence, and unintentional loss associated with analog storage methods, digital archiving allows the stabilisation of endangered sound recordings (Bradley, 2015). As a result of their capacity to enable networked transmission, organised metadata documentation, and high-quality audio and video archiving, digital archives are essential to ethnomusicological study. Digital repositories enable researchers to record contextual details including performer names, performance settings, language use, ritual functions, and cultural meanings in addition to musical sound through standardised metadata frameworks (Seeger, 2016). The emphasis of ethnomusicology on music as a socially embedded practice as opposed to discrete auditory phenomena is consistent with this extended documentation approach. Digital archives thereby improve ethnomusicological data's analytical depth, comparability, and multidisciplinary usefulness (Nettl, 2015).

Beyond research, digital repositories play a major role in music education, cultural revival, and the transfer of information across generations. Due to geographical distance or the deterioration of conventional transmission mechanisms, educational institutions and community organisations may not otherwise have access to repertoires through digitised collections

(Akuno, 2016). Digital archives work as supplementary tools that assist learning while strengthening the continuity of living traditions rather than replacing them in African contexts where elders and master musicians have traditionally served as the principal caretakers of musical knowledge (Makwa, 2020). Significantly, digitalisation makes it easier for archive materials to be returned to their original communities. The ethical necessity of returning digital recordings to the people from whom they were originally gathered is becoming more widely acknowledged in contemporary archival practice, especially when those materials were taken during colonial or extractive studies (Seeger, 2002; Agawu, 2003). In order to rectify historical disparities in knowledge ownership and access, local custodians are given the ability to recover, reinterpret, and communicate their musical legacy on their own terms through community-accessible digital platforms (Akuno, 2016).

Digitisation improves cultural continuity and preservation when done properly. Nonetheless, academics stress that respect for indigenous knowledge systems, informed permission, and ethical cooperation are essential components of successful digital archiving (UNESCO, 2003; Seeger, 2016). Therefore, in an increasingly digital environment, digitisation should be viewed as a culturally placed activity that promotes sustainability, shared custodianship, and the long-term vitality of African indigenous music rather than just a technological procedure.

3.5 Virtual Ethnography and Digital Fieldwork

Virtual ethnography expands the scope of ethnomusicological inquiry by recognizing online spaces as legitimate sites of musical practice, interaction, and meaning-making. With the rapid proliferation of digital platforms, ethnomusicologists increasingly engage with social media, livestreams, video-sharing sites, and virtual communities to observe performances, conduct interviews, and interact with musicians (Hine, 2015; Postill & Pink, 2012). These digital environments enable sustained engagement with geographically dispersed participants, particularly within diasporic African communities, thereby facilitating longitudinal research and deeper insight into evolving musical practices.

Online festivals, livestreamed rites, and digitally mediated performances show how indigenous music in African contexts adjusts to modern realities influenced by migration, globalisation, and technological advancement. Musicians actively recontextualise classic repertoires for virtual audiences while upholding fundamental cultural meanings and performance customs, according to studies of digital performance practices (Barz & Cooley, 2017; Omojola, 2012). Virtual ethnography enhances traditional methods by capturing changing musical realities that increasingly emerge in digital and hybrid spaces, but it does not replace in-person fieldwork, which is still crucial for comprehending embodied practice, spatial interaction, and ritual meaning (Nettl, 2015).

3.6 Reinterpretation and Creative Transformation

African art music, sacred and church music, jazz, film music, and modern popular forms are just a few of the many musical genres whose creative reinterpretation and transformation possibilities have been greatly increased by the growing digital accessibility of African indigenous musical archives. Indigenous rhythmic patterns, melodic contours, formal structures, and performance aesthetics can be studied, reworked, and recontextualised using

digital recordings, transcriptions, and audiovisual documentation (Agawu, 2003; Omojola, 2015). Digital archives today serve as intermediary spaces that connect oral traditions with notated or recorded forms, in contrast to past times when access to indigenous musical knowledge was almost entirely dependent on direct apprenticeship or field immersion.
Indigenous musical materials from archives are frequently used in African art music and intercultural composition as conceptual, rhythmic, or structural frameworks rather than as superficial stylistic embellishments. In order to adapt archived materials to new composing situations while maintaining its inherent logic, composers analytically transcribe drum patterns, tonal inflections, and formal processes (Onyeji, 2016). This method shows a move away from exoticism and toward culturally grounded creativity, where creative thinking is fundamentally informed by indigenous musical systems. Such reassessment affirms that African musical traditions have the capacity for internal renewal and invention, demonstrating continuity rather than discontinuity.

Digital archives have also made it possible for composers and choir directors to re-engage with indigenous sacred repertoires that were previously suppressed by Western hymnody and liturgical conventions in church music and other sacred contexts. Musicians struggle between tradition and modernity in ways that uphold cultural identity while addressing current religious realities by adapting archived indigenous melodies, rhythms, and texts for use in modern worship contexts (Omojola, 2012). Creative transformation preserves indigenous musical values within changing expressive forms rather than undermining authenticity when done with cultural sensitivity and contextual awareness. African music's vitality, according to Agawu (2003), is found in its ability to be reinterpreted based on cultural meaning rather than in its static preservation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations in Digital Ethnomusicology

Complex ethical issues pertaining to intellectual property, permission, access, and cultural representation are brought up by the digitisation and online distribution of indigenous musical recordings. Many African musical traditions are ingrained in culturally regulated knowledge systems, constrained social contexts, or sacred rites where performance and transmission are controlled by customary regulations rather than being freely shared (Nketia, 1974; Seeger, 2016). Without sufficient cultural input, digitally replicating and disseminating such works runs the risk of breaking social norms, distorting meaning, or desacralising customs meant for particular audiences.

In the past, colonial power dynamics that favoured outside scholars and organisations over source communities influenced ethnomusicological study in Africa. With little regard for community approval or future access, recordings were regularly taken out of their cultural contexts and placed in foreign archives (Agawu, 2003; Seeger, 2002). Even though digital technologies present new possibilities for access and preservation, they may unintentionally perpetuate these disparities if authority over digital artifacts is still concentrated in Western or academic organisations. Thus, ethical, participatory, and community-centered methods are emphasised in contemporary digital ethnomusicology. Beyond the initial recording, informed consent must cover decisions regarding digitisation, online access, reuse, and creative adaptation (Akuno, 2016). Respect for limitations imposed on sacred or sensitive items is crucial, as is accurate attribution of performers, communities, and cultural ownership. Shared

custodianship, in which communities actively choose how their musical legacy is recorded, classified, accessed, and understood, is becoming more and more popular in participatory archiving models (Christen, 2015). These ethical theories reframe digital archives as culturally embedded locations formed by mutual respect, negotiation, and accountability rather than as impartial repositories. By foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and community agency, ethical digital ethnomusicology moves away from extractive knowledge production toward collaborative stewardship and cultural sustainability (Seeger, 2016).

3.8 Implications for African Music Scholarship

African music scholarship will be significantly impacted by the incorporation of digital technologies into ethnomusicological study, which will change instructional approaches, modalities of knowledge production, and research methodology. By linking music studies with anthropology, digital humanities, archive science, performance studies, and education, digital ethnomusicology promotes interdisciplinary involvement. African music may now be studied as a complex social, historical, and technological phenomena in addition to as sound thanks to this broadened methodological environment (Nettl, 2015).

The worldwide visibility of African indigenous music has also increased thanks to digitisation and virtual research platforms, which have made it possible for African academics, artists, and institutions to engage more actively in international scholarly discourse. Digital access challenges previous Eurocentric narratives by reducing reliance on externally managed archives and enabling African researchers to reinterpret archival resources through culturally informed views (Akuno, 2016; Omojola, 2015). By placing African artists and academics as authoritative voices in the interpretation of their musical legacy, digital ethnomusicology thereby promotes epistemic fairness.

Digital archives offer important tools for curriculum building, performance training, and compositional analysis in music education. Culturally relevant pedagogy is strengthened when educators and students have access to indigenous repertoires, performance strategies, and contextual information that were previously hard to come by (Makwa, 2020). Digital tools develop new musical languages that are rooted in indigenous aesthetics and encourage creative innovation for composers and performers by facilitating informed engagement with tradition. Digital ethnomusicology presents African indigenous music as a vibrant and progressive addition to the body of musical knowledge worldwide. Digital engagement emphasises African music's continued relevance, adaptability, and creative potential rather than portraying it as a legacy to be conserved. Digital technologies not only preserve the past but also influence the future directions of African music studies and artistic expression when they are directed by moral behavior and academic rigor.

4.0 Conclusion

Due in large part to the quick development of digital technology and the rise of virtual ethnographic practices, ethnomusicology has experienced significant methodological and conceptual change in the twenty-first century. These technologies have significantly changed how African traditional music is recorded, conserved, understood, and disseminated, as this article has shown. In contrast to older ethnomusicological research, which mostly relied on fieldwork, analog recording media, and externally managed archives, modern practice increasingly incorporates digitisation, internet interaction, and cooperative knowledge

creation. These changes indicate an increasing understanding of African indigenous music as a dynamic, flexible, and intellectually sound knowledge system and represent a substantial divergence from extractive research paradigms. According to this study, digitisation and digital archiving are essential for protecting African indigenous music from the dangers of institutional neglect, material deterioration, and the erosion of oral transmission. Ethnomusicologists can preserve musical sounds as well as the social meanings, performance techniques, and historical narratives that are encoded in them by transforming brittle analog recordings into robust digital formats and enhancing them with contextual metadata. By facilitating academic research, music instruction, and cultural revival, as well as allowing communities to re-establish a connection with their displaced or endangered musical heritage, digital archives further expand the reach of indigenous music beyond specific contexts.

The expanding importance of digital fieldwork and virtual ethnography in comprehending modern African musical realities has also been highlighted in the article. Particularly in diasporic and international contexts, online festivals, livestreamed performances, and social media platforms now serve as important venues for musical invention, negotiation, and identity building. Virtual approaches provide useful complementary perspectives that reflect the changing ways music is made, experienced, and transmitted in a digitally mediated environment, even though they cannot replace the embodied insights obtained from physical fieldwork. Therefore, in order to stay responsive to shifting musical landscapes, ethnomusicology must continue to modify its methodological toolkit. Additionally, this study has shown that digital access to indigenous musical archives has stimulated significant reinterpretation and creative development in a variety of artistic fields, including jazz, popular genres, African art music, and holy and church music. Such reinterpretations, when based on cultural awareness, do not compromise authenticity but rather highlight the inventiveness and dynamic quality of African music. Digital tools enable performers and composers to interact critically with tradition, promoting continuity between traditional knowledge and modern expression.

The study has also brought attention to the moral dilemmas that come with digital ethnomusicology. Given the colonial legacies that have historically influenced the acquisition and dissemination of African musical artifacts, issues of intellectual property, permission, representation, and access continue to be major challenges. Beyond technical proficiency, ethical digital practice necessitates ongoing cooperation with source communities, respect for cultural limitations, correct attribution, and shared custodianship of musical history. In order to ensure that digitalisation promotes cultural sustainability rather than exploitation, community-centered approaches and participatory archiving models become crucial frameworks.The sustainable future of African indigenous music, according to this research, depends on digitally informed ethnomusicology that is based on cultural sensitivity, ethical responsibility, and cooperative involvement. When used carefully and properly, digital technologies enhance the transmission, reinterpretation, and worldwide acknowledgment of living traditions rather than replacing them. African indigenous music is positioned by modern ethnomusicology as an important, dynamic addition to world musical knowledge rather than a relic of the past by enabling African communities, academics, and artists to influence the stories around their musical legacy. Such an approach guarantees the preservation, relevance, and meaningful integration of African musical traditions into local and global cultural futures in a world growing more interconnected by the day.

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