

Traditional music and dance preservation in Ghana: Navigating authenticity and globalization

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Abstract

This research delves into the adaptation of traditional music and dance in Ghana, in relation to globalization, technological mediation, and institutional pressures. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, incorporating ethnographic fieldwork, archival analysis, and statistical surveys to probe audience engagement with traditional, modern, and fusion performances. The ANOVA results show that fusion performance garners the highest level of engagement, implying a public preference for continuity that accepts change. The article introduces the concept of contextual fidelity to address the limitations of the discourse on authenticity. Contextual fidelity acts as a culturally grounded evaluative lens that prioritizes intention, community recognition, and function, rather than adhering to rigid formalism. A continuum model of adaptation is proposed, accompanied by a three-tier framework that consists of cultural consonance, narrative continuity, and sonic fidelity to assess performance integrity. Variations in bell patterns are analysed as rhythmic codes that define genres, while institutions such

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as schools, churches, festivals, and policy bodies are studied for their roles in sustaining and transforming traditions. The findings show that traditional performance in Ghana flourishes not by opposing change but through responsible adaptation.

Keywords: contextual fidelity, authenticity, adaptation, Ghanaian music and dance, sonic fidelity, cultural sustainability.

Introduction

The development of temporal adaptation in traditional music and dance entails a complex interplay of continuity and change (Georgios, 2018; Emielu, 2018; Addaquay, 2023a; Agawu, 2003). Intergenerational cultures function as channels of identity formation and entertainment (Mirzeler, 2021; Arom, 2018; Nketia, 1954). Current dynamics are influenced by substantial intercultural interactions resulting from globalization (Nettl, 2015; Floyd, 2005), which may both enrich and threaten the sustainability of traditions. Understanding change and continuity is crucial for achieving a balance between cultural sustainability and evolution, where “evolution” represents subtle musical transformations.

Odfunso et al. (2022) highlight the importance of protecting traditional music and dance; however, this study contends that maintaining a specific tradition in its original form may be impractical. Addaquay (2023b) characterizes modified music and dance from Sub-Saharan Africa as “opinionated delivery.” This study argues that, although cultural sustainability faces challenges due to its reliance on oral traditions, any modifications should not fundamentally change the tradition’s meaning or intent to ensure sustainability. This raises questions regarding whether alterations in native lands are deliberate or result from global progression or cultural adaptations.

Interactions among dominant cultures, minorities, subcultures, neo-tribes, and club cultures are essential in cultural studies. Dominant cultures establish standards and

principles, while minority groups experience varying degrees of exclusion. Subcultures arise from dominant cultures and maintain certain elements while forging new pathways. The term “sister cultures” metaphorically denotes a shared heritage and diversity, necessitating careful interpretation to prevent misinterpretation. These cultures may share historical origins yet have evolved distinct identities over time, leading to the emergence of subcultures.

For instance, the Akan people comprise various subgroups such as the Ashanti and Fante, which share lineage and customs that warrant consideration as sister cultures. Nonetheless, if performance variations stem from adaptations from these interconnected cultures or insufficient access to the premiering of a dance, performers must refrain from altering the dance’s authentic essence. Addaquay (2023b) critiques practitioners who assert that even indigenous peoples do not embody the original, emphasizing that music and dance are inherently hybrid and devoid of a singular original form.

In this regard, authenticity—that is, established art forms which convey historical narratives, societal norms, and cultural identities that extend beyond simple entertainment (Xidias, 2017; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998)—is essential. However, defining “authenticity” within any cultural context presents complexities, especially regarding traditional African music. This challenges the idea that authenticity arises from the Western concepts of “purity” and “tradition,” which do not accurately represent the evolving nature of African musical traditions. Authenticity should therefore be viewed as an ongoing process influenced by community ownership, artistic innovation, and incremental change rather than as a fixed starting point.

Consequently, the phrase ‘preservation of traditional music and dance’ poses challenges, as it demands the maintenance of these art forms in a static manner, which contradicts their inherently fluid and adaptive characteristics. Traditional forms should not be regarded as static artifacts; instead, they

should be understood as dynamic expressions shaped by social, political, and technological changes. Terms such as “cultural continuity,” “transmission,” “recontextualization,” and “adaptive sustainability” effectively encapsulate the organic transformations that maintain core values while facilitating evolution. While transforming traditional music and dance, it is necessary to strike a balance between adaptation and cultural sustainability.

Literature review of tradition and modernity in music and dance

Patterson (2015) contests the idea that oral transmission of music is either primitive or incomplete. He characterizes it as a complex and lasting medium that is essential for the historical comprehension of music. The study underscores the ongoing significance of oral traditions in modern settings, corroborating Nketia’s (1954) claims regarding their essential function in African music cultures. Bonhomme (2007) provides a focused examination of initiatory oral traditions in Central Africa, illustrating their function in connecting generations through ancestral wisdom and ritual frameworks.

Merriam (1964) emphasises the essential function of oral tradition in transmitting cultural values and contextualizing music within its wider sociocultural framework. Finnegan (2003) also asserts the importance of oral traditions in maintaining the vitality and identity of cultures through generations. Vansina (1985) argues that oral traditions serve as historically credible sources of knowledge, whereas Zahan et al. (1979) emphasizes their spiritual and communal roles within African societies.

Dor (2015), Mugovhani (2015), and Lewis (2016) examine the influence of globalization on traditional musical practices, specifically focusing on how African musical traditions are being transformed by digital platforms and cross-cultural interactions. Some critiques contend that globalization presents

a threat to the stability of traditional forms and opportunities for cultural dissemination, as it leads to innovation and hybridization.

Da Lage (2009), Mabingo (2015), Gunderson (2010), Tang (2007), and Jankowsky (2022) present a range of perspectives on the sustainability and transformation of indigenous music practices in relation to the contested concept of authenticity. The authors analyze the conflict between contemporary reinterpretations and the imperative to preserve cultural integrity. Waterman (2002) presents the concept of progressive traditionalism, facilitating innovation within established traditions, whereas Agawu (2003) supports the revitalization of musical heritage via careful adaptation. Nettle (2005) posits that continuous change is an inherent characteristic of musical cultures. Collins (1994), as referenced by Emielu (2018), corroborates this view by analysing the evolution of African music in relation to its sociopolitical context.

These academic contributions indicate that traditional music and dance are dynamic and continually evolve owing to historical, technological, and sociopolitical influences. They reveal that although many established practices are well-documented, gaps persist, especially regarding lesser-known regional traditions, the evolution of digital archives, and the influence of diasporic movements on heritage preservation. These works highlight the consensus that oral transmission, adaptation, and the redefinition of authenticity are crucial for the survival and vitality of traditional African music and dance. This lays the groundwork for ongoing academic inquiry into the negotiation between tradition and modernity, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. In light of this background, the present study sought to:

- i. explore how Ghanaian traditional music and dance are being adapted in response to globalization, technological advancements, and institutional changes, while maintaining cultural integrity.

- ii. evaluate audience engagement across traditional, modern, and hybrid performances through a mixed-methods research approach.
- iii. propose a context-sensitive evaluative framework incorporating cultural consonance, narrative continuity, and sonic fidelity to assess authenticity and adaptation.

Collectively, these objectives emphasize the sustainability of tradition amid transformation, offering both theoretical insights and practical tools for cultural preservation and scholarly analysis.

Material and methods

This mixed-methods study used quantitative analysis and qualitative fieldwork to understand the cultural background and patterns of traditional Ghanaian music and dance. The author spent a year in different Ghanaian communities participating in village life, attending nighttime drum sessions, and interviewing people. This gradual integration fostered confidence and made performers provide rich first-hand observations.

Contrasting yet complementary traditions were observed in both rural and urban contexts. Young artists in the urban group were forthright about how they combined traditional and modern aspects. However, rural communities had strict rules that demonstrate cultural immersion. This oral-tradition strategy valued narrative and local knowledge (Patterson, 2015; Bonhomme, 2007).

The author also used archival and internet research to support fieldwork. Examples were historical records, audio-visual documents, and national and private collections. Village elders discussed musical continuity and change after hearing the 1960s' recording of ceremonial drumming. Recordings on Facebook, YouTube, and digital archives were also examined. Although online sustainability projects have faced challenges in

remote areas with limited internet connectivity, younger urban artists have adapted by recording and sharing performances via cell phones and the internet, thereby transforming their archival practices. These findings provide a basis for comparing traditional and contemporary methods of cultural preservation.

A survey involving 21 participants aged between 18 to 30 years was also conducted to assess engagement with and reinterpretation of traditional forms. The aim was to examine how people integrate heritage and innovation by leveraging intergenerational knowledge and digital media. The questionnaire evaluated participation, performance engagement, and utilization of traditional arts in digital contexts. The survey was initially administered orally in native languages and subsequently in a digital format. IBM SPSS Statistics (v25) was used to analyse the data, employing one-way ANOVA and regression analysis to assess associations, with all methods achieving significance at $p < 0.05$.

Ethical protocols ensured informed consent, protected anonymity, and honoured cultural sensitivities, leading to reflective and community-focused conclusions.

Findings

The one-way ANOVA conducted for quantitative analysis indicated notable differences ($F(2,18) = 15.24$, $p < 0.05$) in engagement levels across the three groups: traditional, modern, and (fusion)hybrid performers. Fusion performances achieved the highest engagement scores ($M = 8.00$), traditional performances followed closely ($M = 7.43$), and modern performances were rated the lowest ($M = 5.29$). The results indicate a clear audience inclination towards performances that seamlessly merge cultural traditions with contemporary influence.

The qualitative data provided deeper insights into the emotional and cultural significance of these performances. In both urban and rural settings, audiences demonstrated notable receptiveness to aspects that maintain traditional markers, such

as rhythm, instrumentation, and ceremonial sequencing. Older generations appreciated performances that maintained spiritual significance, such as libation rituals, whereas younger individuals resonated more with flexible formats that upheld narrative and rhythmic integrity.

Fusion performances garnered significant acclaim for their dynamic energy and deep cultural significance. These works frequently altered aspects such as costuming and melodic layering, while preserving fundamental traditional elements. In urban settings, the seamless fusion of traditional Ghanaian music with genres like highlife, Afrobeats, and gospel has created vibrant, accessible pathways for contemporary audiences, while preserving the cultural depth and richness of its roots.

In contrast, modern performances frequently appeared to lack significant symbolic depth in the opinion of the audience. Although visually appealing, their separation from established frameworks rendered them less captivating, particularly in rural areas. The lack of cultural references diminished the emotional impact, underscoring the significance of maintaining the inherent meaning or original traditional dimensions in order to engage the audience.

Findings related to gender emphasize an increasing acceptance of female involvement in drumming traditions that were previously limited to men. Responses were diverse, with some supporting inclusivity, while others emphasized the significance of upholding the physical and tonal standards inherent to traditional drumming. Nonetheless, there was agreement that any alteration should not undermine the tonal integrity.

Instrumental elements, particularly bell patterns, have become key distinguishing features of the genre. The presence of variations such as the *dawuro* in Adowa and the dual-tone bell in *Agbadza* allowed both performers and audiences to differentiate between performance genres and attribute cultural significance. These patterns functioned as rhythmic anchors and carriers of identity and shared memory within the community.

In the realm of vocal practice, performers emphasized that the audience's perception of vocal techniques, such as vibrato or legato, depends significantly on the cultural context. Although these were valued when in harmony with emotional tone, conflicting tonalities detracted from immersion, irrespective of technical skill.

The impact of technology on engagement patterns has been substantial. In rural regions, there were constraints regarding digital access, whereas urban participants actively engaged with mobile phones and social media to document and disseminate their performances. Viewers reacted favorably to innovations that improved accessibility and visibility while preserving the core nature of the performance. Nonetheless, the emergence of digital alternatives to acoustic instruments has sparked concern regarding the sustainability of timbral authenticity.

Institutional contexts, particularly schools and churches, influenced the content and structure of performances. Educational environments contributed to the maintenance of traditions among young individuals, while also posing a threat of uniformity. Churches frequently maintained their rhythm while substituting conventional narratives with themes rooted in Christianity. In both instances, adaptations were valued when symbolic and rhythmic integrity were maintained.

State-driven cultural policies, exemplified by the Ghana Dance Ensemble and national festivals, were recognised as serving both protective and prescriptive functions. In an effort to protect endangered practices, there was also a codification of specific forms, which may have constrained their natural development.

The findings indicate that Ghanaian audiences do not favour strict traditionalism or unrestrained innovation. Engagement is most robust when performances demonstrate contextual fidelity, respecting the historical, spiritual, and aesthetic aspects of the tradition while incorporating suitable innovation. Sustainable performance in Ghana depends not on static preservation but on adaptive practices intricately connected to cultural memory.

Discussion

Unchanged musical and dance genres are rare. According to Addaquay (2023b), most ancient dances were created before cultural divisions, undermining the idea of a single origin. Green (2019) emphasizes that oral transmission is useful but prone to distortion, making documentation essential for continuity. Nyamwaka et al. (2013) contended that the Gusii people's dancing traditions, however modified, are crucial identity conduits. Thus, "authenticity" should entail faithfully transmitting a tradition's cultural core over time, not historical imitation.

However, modifications are not always beneficial. Performers must carefully determine the parts that can be modified without distorting meaning. Sub-Saharan African performances use gestures, timbres, tones, and costumes to define identity. Core pieces that are missing or replaced invite misrepresentations. Bell patterns indicate rituals, celebrations, or sadness in dances. Addaquay (2023a) notes that *Agbe* and *Agbadza* have similar rhythmic frameworks but use different bell tones: two tones and a single tone. Simplifying these distinctions for convenience can reduce significance, even if viewers do not notice them.

The titles of dances such as *Adenkum* and *Fontomfrom* come from their instruments. Armstrong (2016), Nyomi (2001), and Adinku (2004) contend that instrument-performance identity linkages are not accidental. *Adenkum* is sometimes played without its characteristic instrument in Sefwi—a compromise, and not a precedent. According to Li (2016), innovation should strengthen cultural meaning.

Colonialism complicates the development of tradition. Colonial hierarchies favoured Western instruments, destroying indigenous cultural ecosystems, as asserted by Agawu (2003) and Collins (1994). However, King Sunny Adé (Oludare, 2015) and Oumou Sangaré (Maxwell, 2003) show that innovation and authenticity can coexist. While conserving cultural narratives, these performers also include Western elements.

Addaquay (2023c) argues that vocal excellence is culturally determined. Western classical aesthetics prioritize vibrato and sustained phrases, but Ghanaian vocal traditions generally ignore them (Addaquay, 2025). Meintjes (2003), Nketia (2005), Mulaudzi (2014), and Ntshinga (2009) list community mentorship, performative context, and expressive tone as African vocal benchmarks. The cultural resonance of these elements enhances audience engagement with both fusion and traditional genres, suggesting that rigidity in vocal technique can be limiting and counterproductive. Tight-tonal standards may restrict innovation. Vibrato and tone shifts can improve performance when properly performed. It is important that such adjustments respect community expression codes. As studies show, tradition thrives through careful and respectful modification.

Gender complicates performance practice. Ghana's women drummer debates exemplify the tensions between tradition and gender equity. Some traditions require masculine physical strength, however, Senne (2016) and James (2023) advise against excluding women. If given the opportunity, women can succeed in these roles through training. Mentorship and merit-based access can balance respect for tradition with inclusivity.

Technology adds complexity to the process. Urban artists use social networking, streaming, and mobile documenting to attract more people. Synthesizers and keyboard-based drum simulations have provided mixed reviews. They improve convenience, but may degrade timbral integrity (Peres, 2016; Moore, 1992). Thus, traditional digitalization must stress context and authenticity.

This study offers “contextual fidelity” as a better evaluation lens than static “authenticity” to get beyond superficial labels. Scholars should focus on honouring cultural setting and purpose in a performance, rather than ‘authenticity’. The ceremonial spirit of an *Adowa* funeral dance on a modern stage may retain its authenticity, even under the contemporary

spotlight (Krueger, 2013). This values intent and culture over form.

This study found that performers kept contextually significant features such as libation songs while experimenting with new formats. Authenticity refers to keeping tradition alive and not freezing it. Instead of defining “pure” and “corrupt,” contextual fidelity measures how deeply a performance is rooted in its origin, independent of surface alteration.

This model rejects classifications labelled as “authentic” and “inauthentic”. Village drumming at church may appear “inauthentic” to purists, but its practitioners find spiritual and social continuity. This study indicates that audiences and artists choose between sustainability and modification. Hybrid performance may change the dress code or sustain traditional rhythms. According to ethnomusicologists, such as Johnson (2000), evaluating practice entails considering who, where, and why.

Indeed, many scholars consider absolute authenticity to be obsolete. The continuum paradigm used in this study offers nuanced judgment. A modern *Kpanlogo* with an electric guitar may sustain its Ga beat and community spirit. The paradigm emphasizes descriptive precision over judgement and shows how Ghanaian traditions develop through negotiation rather than abandonment. In this study, I propose a three-tier paradigm to operationalise this continuum:

1. Cultural Consonance: Does the performance match community ideals, aesthetics, and functions? A warrior dance adapted for school maintains a shared ethos through respect.
2. Narrative Continuity: Is the storyline, moral, or ritual thread maintained? A revised Kundum may retain its harvest symbolism, even with a new format.
3. Sonic Fidelity: Are tonal signs such as call-and-response forms, bell rhythms, and scales maintained?

An Ewe drumming piece with new words may maintain the same structure and time order.

This approach allows for a sophisticated adaption profile, in which a song may sustain rhythm but lose narrative, or vice versa. Bell rhythms are generative, similar to music DNA, according to Smith (2017). *Kpanlogo's* rhythmic pattern and the Cuban son clave demonstrate transatlantic connections. This awareness is significant, given that the current education policy mandates that 80% of the content in basic music education must be of African origin (Acquah & Mensah, 2021). Festivals and churches, albeit sometimes ambivalent, may sustain or evolve customs. Instead of authenticity, contextual fidelity better depicts Ghanaian music and dance as dynamic and flexible emotions.

Conclusion

This study analysed Ghanaian traditional music and dance in the context of globalization, technological mediation, and cultural reinvention. The findings demonstrate that tradition endures not by opposing change but through deliberate negotiation and cultural agency. The quantitative findings show that fusion performances that integrate traditional and modern elements yield the greatest audience engagement. The findings from the ethnographic and archival research provide qualitative insights that suggest that performers and audiences are attracted to culturally rooted expressions that develop while maintaining their symbolic integrity.

This study presents the notion of contextual fidelity as a culturally aware substitute for authenticity, supported by a three-tier evaluative framework comprising cultural consonance, narrative continuity, and sonic fidelity, for the assessment of adaptation. Case studies from Ghana have demonstrated how artists adjust their practices while sustaining their relevance. These findings present practical implications for policy, pedagogy, and cultural programming, emphasizing the influence

of educational systems, religious institutions, festivals, and state policies on traditional performance.

In conclusion, the findings from the current study show that traditional Ghanaian performance is not diminishing; rather, it is robustly redefining itself in reaction to historical and contemporary factors. However, the present study has some limitations. These include the use of a small, geographically confined sample size and possible biases in participant responses concerning “engagement.” Future research should implement more extensive demographic and longitudinal analyses to identify significant changes over time.

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