Decolonizing the African musical language and Identity through Onyeji's 'Research Approach to music composition' in Nigeria
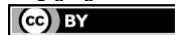
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Abstract
Ongoing research in the arts, humanities and social sciences has largely explored different subjects on decolonising African socio-cultural perspectives, including music composition and performances. Art music composers in Nigeria and diaspora beyond creative expression have adopted their native languages as a viable tool for decolonising their continent. More recently, works and arguments of music scholars like Meki Nzewi, Dan Agu, Bode Omojola, Olusoji Stephen, and Christian Onyeji, among so many, have emphasised the deliberate creative engagement of indigenous languages and musical idioms as a tool for recovering Nigerian indigenous identity and sustainability of their indigenous musical cultures. Building on Hofstede's theory on cross-cultural interactions and Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory in addressing the issue of decolonising Africa through music and language, the study employed qualitative and ethnographic research methods to investigate the significance of Onyeji's research compositional approach in sustaining African musical culture and identity. The study findings based on the analysis of the music piece "*Abigbo* for Modern Orchestra" and its creative milieu within the context of decolonisation conclude that art music composition based on thorough cultural investigations of a particular musical style or ensemble for heritage preservation is an effective medium of decolonising African music and language.

Introduction
The major identified loophole in the decolonisation process, as observed in the 2003 UNESCO conventions dedicated to the "Intangible Cultural Heritage", is the confusing and unsustainable outcome of the imposition of a foreign language in its entirety to promote an indigenous African identity (Adeniyi, 2021). Pinxteren's (2020) argument against this approach proposed a more deliberate and active engagement of African people with African languages in disseminating formal knowledge. Through his engagement with Hofstede's theory on cross-cultural interactions based on the concept of societal divergence and the assumption of cultural distinction (Hofstede, 2001), Pinxteren views each culture as the chief influencer of the holistic disposition of its members in terms of values and beliefs. He prioritised language as the key player in the process of the revitalisation of African identity (Pinxteren, 2020).

As precedence, the perceived supremacy of the West over the African continent is expressed in the perception of the Africans and their colonial masters, by self and another through colonisation. The colonial period came with conflicting self-esteem between the colonial masters and the colonised. On the part of the Africans lies the drastic downward slide of self-esteem and loss of identity as the colonial masters made their culture, in its entirety, the primary source of their identity, looks barbaric and below their set standard. More devastating is the African perspective of themselves as the inferior other by embracing the values of the opposing culture either consciously or unconsciously at the detriment of their heritage and identity. Formal education was deliberately and majorly disseminated in the foreign language to interrupt the transmission of the African heritage, which is rooted in their language through oral tradition, to instil a new identity in the colonised. The process can be reversed only through the same medium of active engagement of African indigenous language by African indigenous people through the most appealing contemporary medium of performing arts, of which music composition is the core.

After independence, Nigeria engaged indigenous knowledge in resuscitating its cultural identity in the musical art industry. More worrisome is the uncertainty of the West's willingness to listen to African indigenous voices (Briggs & Sharpe, 2004). In recent debates on decolonising knowledge production in Africa, Crawford, Mai-Bomu & Landstrom (2021) argue against the predominance of Western epistemologies and colonial legacies over knowledge production in Africa, resulting in the marginalisation and erasure of indigenous African knowledge systems. They highlight the need to challenge and disrupt these colonial frameworks to foster a more inclusive and equitable knowledge production landscape in Africa through language use. In contrast, Western epistemologies may be necessary for technological innovations and global awareness of African indigenous cultures. For instance, art music originates in Western culture and has been engaged by African art music composers as a medium of communicating African identity to the world. Transcribing African indigenous music on paper and the composition of new music in indigenous languages and idioms has ignited more global interest and queries on African music and national/cultural identity. This has formed a formidable movement toward the decolonisation of Africa since music is considered integral to African day-to-day experiences that shape people's values and beliefs. However, agreeing with Spivak's (2004) opinion that the audibility of indigenous voices depends only on their expression in the language within the context of Western experiences. This study argues that while leveraging some fundamental Western elements of art music composition, the African voice should be louder. For instance, the musical engagement of Africans aimed at projecting African identity should not be overly saturated with Western musical idioms at the expense of African musical idioms. Approaching the concept of decolonising Africa through music and language, the study employed Hofstede's theory (Hofstede, 1980) on cross-cultural interactions and Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) in analysing Onyeji's creative engagement in promoting the Igbo language and musical culture within the context of Western musical experiences through his music piece "*Abigbo* for modern orchestra" as a sample of the participation of music scholars in Nigeria in decolonising the African musical language and identity.

Method
This paper employed qualitative research methods through ethnographic investigations and a literature review. It analysed Onyeji's "Abigbo for Modern Orchestra" based on Hofstede's theory on cross-cultural interactions and Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory in addressing the issue of decolonising Africa through music and language.

Decolonising African Language

According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), decolonisation is the "liberatory language of the future for Africa". It is an offshoot of the colonised's political and epistemological engagement that includes how they think, their knowledge of themselves and others, and their overall actions Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018). For instance, Chimbunde et al. (2022) exemplify the African's fight against Eurocentric paradigms in education through African languages and the decolonisation of language policies since language is considered crucial to decolonisation processes as it is intimately tied to power, culture, and identity (Adeniyi, 2021).

First, a brief look into colonisation and its effect on Africa is essential to this study. Colonisation generally comes with the imposition of the colonisers' language on the colonised people, making it the dominant language of commerce, education, government, and media. Motsaathebe (2010) posits that language embodies culture and argues against over-reliance on foreign languages and its consequences of suppressing African culture while promoting foreign cultures. This process of linguistic imperialism and the UN groupings in policy making that target to protect the cultural creators or ethnic groups (UNESCO, 2003) erodes the colonised people's languages, cultures, and ways of life, thereby contributing to the peoples' loss of identity and a sense of inferiority. Historically, colonisation was driven by some identified factors like economic interests, political power, religious and cultural motives, etc. Arguably, colonisation has negative effects on both the colonised and the colonisers as it is characterised by violence, exploitation, and the suppression of indigenous cultures, breeds resentment, rebellion, and vengeance at the slightest opportunity on the part of the colonised. Documentations of African colonial experiences by (Ayegbusi, 2017; Boahen, 2020), among others, reveal the historical injustice of subjugation and exploitation of indigenous peoples and their resources, such as land, resources, and culture by the colonisers through the denial of the people's political sovereignty and self-governance, which left them vulnerable to the exploitation of foreign powers. Therefore, decolonisation starts with reclaiming and revitalising these endangered indigenous languages and cultures.

The colonisers' language could thrive in Africa based on the challenges of the homogeneity of African languages. Many dialects within each language have made it difficult to establish a standard language that can be universally understood across different African regions and countries. Decisions on a single lingua franca that can be used for communication and education to establish a standardised system of spelling and grammar may be difficult because of the existence of multiple official languages and the need for more resources and infrastructure to support the development and promotion of African languages. Also, the contentious political, economic, and cultural issues cannot be overlooked (Motsaathebe, 2010; Lüpke, 2015; Wolff, 2016). Therefore, a concerted effort from governments, creative artists, educators, linguists, and communities in promoting and preserving linguistic diversity is essential to facilitating effective communication and cultural understanding.

Music and language stand as vital means of communication that helps in the transmission of indigenous knowledge through songs, proverbs, stories, incantations, riddles and so on (Bamgbose, 2000; Ndhlovu, 2008; Tchindjang et al., 2008). As a crucial element of decolonisation, they facilitate rectifying the impact of historical injustice, promote political sovereignty, enable economic independence, and preserve cultural heritage. Although within distinct domains, they share some interesting intersections in structure, emotional expression, cultural influence, and brain processing

(Jäncke, 2012; Ogg et al., 2019). Therefore, promoting and using indigenous languages through musical composition and performances can help challenge the colonial power structures in place for centuries.

Music is core to human culture; it has the power to be extremely appealing to the human soul. It can elicit strong emotions and moods in listeners and serves as a sociocultural phenomenon that transcends language barriers. Africa has over 54 countries and more than 2,000 languages spoken, each with unique cultural traditions and musical styles, yet undoubted commonalities and shared influences connecting them across different indigenous boundaries (Mbaegbu, 2015). The role of music in bridging communal borders can be explored in actualising decolonisation efforts through various mediums. Firstly, creating and performing music in indigenous languages can help promote and celebrate the language and make it more accessible to those who may not have spoken it before. In significant ways, songwriting or music composition has helped express indigenous communities' unique perspectives and experiences (Udaya, 2017). Secondly, a collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous musicians interested in promoting and learning about indigenous languages can help create new audiences for the music and the language. Thirdly, traditional music and dance performances can help to preserve and promote indigenous languages by showcasing the cultural practices and traditions associated with the language. These musical performances can also help to build community and pride in indigenous culture as a prerequisite of the decolonisation process.

Appropriating Hofstede's and Vygotsky's Theories to Decolonization Processes

Hofstede (1980), a Dutch social psychologist and anthropologist, developed the cultural dimensions theory during the late 1960s and early 1970s while working at IBM. Hofstede studied how values in the workplace are influenced by culture, and his research has since become widely recognised and referenced in the field of cross-cultural studies. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory identifies six dimensions that can help understand cultural variations and differences between societies. These dimensions are power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. Applying this theory to decolonisation involves examining how these cultural dimensions shape the relationships and dynamics between colonisers and colonised peoples. Power distance refers to the extent to which a society accepts and expects unequal power distribution. This helps to highlight the need to address the issue of power imbalances during the decolonisation process. The individualism versus collectivism dimension helps to shed light on how individual or collective identities play a role in decolonisation movements and the importance of community solidarity in challenging colonial legacies. Vygotsky's (1986) Sociocultural theory primarily focused on human cognitive development with keen reference to culture, language and the community. It suggests that language development is a socially-mediated process shaped by cultural context and can facilitate cognitive development and learning. Language ultimately serves as the link between human and their environment and fosters the continuity of the community itself. Hence, the role of language beyond psychological activity involves "mediation between cultural artefacts" and people's interactions that "shape their thinking and behaviour" (Vygotsky, 1986:37).

Vygotsky's (1986) theory of language development emphasises the critical role of social interactions and cultural contexts in language acquisition. According to this theory, language is a means of communication and a tool for thought and cognitive development. This theory posits that language development begins with social interactions, especially between children and adults, through dialogues and conversations. For instance, children learn language by imitating the speech of others

and by receiving feedback and guidance from more knowledgeable individuals in their environment, mostly through rhymes, folk songs and lullabies. Therefore, introducing Western education through schools and churches as a vital aspect of colonisation significantly interrupted the continuity of African cultural heritage through stigmatising indigenous languages, cultural activities, and beliefs (McCarty, 2003). African children were taught Western rhymes, Bible stories and songs to replace indigenous games, folklore and songs. Sunday school classes in the churches were acculturation rooms for imprinting Western values in the innocent minds of African children who grew up to train their children based on Western ideologies, neglecting their indigenous language and ways of life (Mackenzie, (1993). While the benefits of civilisation and globalisation are necessary for the well-being of humanity, this study argues that helpful cultural heritage should be sustained, especially the language and the music of indigenous African people as an emblem of their identity.

Research composition approach to decolonisation
Decolonisation refers to undoing the effects of colonisation, which typically involves political, social, cultural, and economic transformations. It aims to address the legacy of colonialism, including the power imbalances, cultural assimilation, economic exploitation, and systemic inequalities that resulted from colonial rule. It is expedient to note that decolonisation is a complex and ongoing process with no one-size-fits-all approach. Decolonisation requires active participation, dialogue, and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including governments, indigenous communities, civil society organisations, and international bodies, to develop context-specific strategies and solutions. Chavez et al. (2019) defined decolonisation as a radical sociocultural and political (power) transformation. They argued against its use in music research without carefully considering the practical approaches to its process. This study calls for more active participation of creative artists and music composers, especially regarding their collaboration with cultural stakeholders of indigenous communities by studying their music and the creative milieu that informs them for documentation, wider accessibility, continuity, and further scholarly investigations.

According to Onyeji (2002), "Research Composition" is a compositional approach to contemporary art music composition based on an in-depth ethnomusicological study of certain indigenous music cultures and the application of their creative elements and idioms in a manner that ensures an accurate representation of the chosen indigenous music in literary form. Drawing from the indigenous Igbo musical paradigm, Onyeji's creative efforts contribute to decolonising the Nigerian musical language. For example, his Abigbo for modern orchestra stands as a framework of the research composition approach, characterised by a well-structured research and creative procedure initiated by ethnomusicological fieldwork on the music and musicians through audio-visual recording of interviews, observation, and participation where possible. The recordings are followed by transcription and analysis, after which the creative idioms and elements of the chosen indigenous music are extracted and applied to create a new music piece that promotes authentic and dependable indigenous musical understanding. Finally, the new music piece is evaluated based on its coherence with the original indigenous music through performance or computerised pre-play device.

Based on the above, the research approach to music composition can significantly facilitate the decolonisation of African musical language and identity. Through ethnomusicological fieldwork, indigenous language and music cultures are extensively engaged with and appreciated. More importantly, endangered languages and music cultures are salvaged and properly documented through their use in the creative efforts of musical compositions, either as pure vocal or instrumental or a combination of both. Rewriting this indigenous songs/music and incorporating traditional

instruments, melodies, and rhythms into new compositions can help reclaim and celebrate already suppressed indigenous people's cultural heritage through colonisation and other vices.

Abigbo for Modern Symphony Orchestra

Abigbo for Modern Symphony Orchestra was composed by Christian Onyeji in 2002 as a doctoral research composition. The composition was based on the Abigbo choral dance music, originally found among the Mbaise indigenous people of the Igbo-speaking part of the South Eastern region of Nigeria. Having studied the socio-cultural and creative ambience of the *Abigbo* ensemble, the creative process of its performance, the hypothetical elements of the music, its social aesthetics normative, as well as the artistic assessment and holistic appreciation of *Abigbo* music were presented in the composition, (Onyeji, 2007).

In his work, the composer employed the seminal compositional materials identified in the music to create a new piece of music. The composition reflected a careful recombination of the idiomatic and stylistic distinction of the original music with selected Western classical compositional methods. This resulted in the continuance of the indigenous *Abigbo* music in contemporary art music form through the use of *Abigbo* harmonic style, as a result of the chordal intervals he employed (that is, 4ths, 5ths and 6ths with seldom use of 3rds), which are contrary to the Western functional harmonies based on triads. Also, the instrumental imitation of the *Abigbo* melodic structure of responsorial, solo statement and chorus presentation was used. The element of Igbo dance and performance environment was articulated in the work, and some Abigbo musical instruments were used to retain the aesthetic of the traditional music.

The composition is in three movements, similar to the Western Sonata: the first movement serves as the exposition of the symphony; the second movement is the variation which is characterised by body rhythms such as stamping of feet, clapping of hands and slow swaying of the body to maintain the Melo-rhythmic impulse of the music, as well as the combination of voice with the instruments which reflects the link between the new work and the traditional *Abigbo* music. The third movement is a development of the first movement transformed into a new meter.

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Extracted from Abigbo for Modern Orchestra (Onyeji, C. 2002)

Song Text in Igbo language and idiom

Ha e e, ha e e	*Ha e e, ha e e*
Ki li jam kili jam jam ijam	*Ki li jam kili jam jam ijam*
Ha e e he	*Ha e e he*
M mam ma ma e	*Very very good*
Ki li jam ijam ja kili ja kili ja ja	*Ki li jam ijam ja kili ja kili ja ja*

I ya I kili he	*I ya I kili he*
M mam ma he he a	*Oh! very very good*
M mam ma a ya iyo o jim jim	*Oh! It's very very good, jim jim*
Le ile o la lo lo	*Le ile o la lo lo*
O le I l rile ha lele	*O le I l rile ha lele*
La lo lo la lo lo le ile ha lele	*La lo lo la lo lo le ile ha lele*
M mam ma he he a	*Very very good*
M mam ma o le I yo o	*Oh! It's very good*
M mam ma e	*Very good!*
M mam ma a ya iyo o jim jim	*Oh! It's very very good, jim jim*
O le I l rile ha lele	*O le I l rile ha lele*
La lo lo la lo lo le ile ha lele	*La lo lo la lo lo le ile ha lele*

M mam ma - Very good!

I yo o - Wow!

Jim jim jam - A light hearted expression excitement

Le e le he - A syllabic expression of body movement and gesture of joy

Background to the composition

More recently is the fusion of ethnographic study of indigenous music and creative composition (research composition) Onyeji, 2002. The composer is adopting the engagement of the unique creative elements of Igbo music. The composer's engagement of the Ufie the Igbo master drum (large wooden slit drum) for the piano part of the composition synthesised the elements of rhythm, dance, polyrhythm, texture, and Melo-rhythm. The work engaged a ten-tone scale derived from two pentatonic scales from the Ukom music of the Ngawa Igbo community. The word Abigbo connotes the style of traditional choral dance and Igbo performing groups in the southeastern part of Nigeria. According to the composer, the text of the music is described as satiric or lampooning (Onyeji, 2002). One of the definitions given to the word Abigbo by the composer is "Igbo gossip". Thus, Abigbo songs are based on the talks about the living members of the community as against the phenomenal history of the dead ancestors of the people. The work gave an extensive history of the origin of the music. Abigbo music, according to oral tradition, was traced to the Amuzu Ezinihite, which is necessary to preserve the music heritage.

In the composer's interaction with the adherents of the music, the phrase "Abigbo j'adianyi nma na nmkpuru obi", meaning Abigbo gives us pleasure, seems to be what informs the composer's choice of text in the vocal section of the composition. Also, the categorisation of the music under the 'Music event' division, as proposed by Nzewi, connotes its flexible musical context. The music is light-hearted

and suitable for dance on light occasions (Nzewi, 1991, p. 37). In Onyeji's words. Abigbo music composition follows a specific sequence- (1) *Iro egwu* - Musical cognition (2) Hule *egwu*- Evaluation of tune (3) *Ihoro egwu*- choosing the most appropriate tune. Reconciling the characteristics of Abigbo music with the composer's choice of text, Abigbo songs may be performed without instrumental accompaniment but rather engage the stamping of feet, swaying of the body and corresponding gestures as accompaniments to the singing. This is evidenced in the vocal jargon used by the composer in the vocal part of the new music piece to demonstrate these musical gestures attributed to the traditional music. Abigbo music is mostly responsorial and employed by Onyeji throughout the composition, especially the second movement of the music, as highlighted in this study. It is performed in a gay mood with a moderate tempo using varied melodic and harmonic movements as the text suggests. The engagement of indigenous musical instrument (*Nkwa-ukim, Nkwa-etiti, Nkelebe, Oyo, Ekere, Atani, Igbugbo,* and *Mkpo*) guided by indigenous thought enrich the composition and forms a formidable effort of the composer towards the decolonisation of African art music (Onyeji, 2002, p. 13).

As a heritage, Indigenous *Abigbo* music text is generally poetic and usually informed by the socio-cultural life of the indigenous Igbo people. This is expressed through an idiomatic style of illusion and preverbal expressions. Similarly, the combination of homophonic, polyphonic and heterophonic textures of music as well as the deep vocal style of the "All male" *Abigbo* ensemble, were the creative idioms and elements that inform the new piece of music (Onyeji, (2002, p. 16). Conclusively, and more important, is the theme of the choice of text by the composer, which is a simple expression of affirmation to the richness and goodness of the indigenous music heritage worthy of preservation.

Conclusion

When discussing decolonisation processes, two theories can be applied Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. While these theories were not specifically developed to address decolonisation, they provide valuable insights into culture, power, and social change dynamics. These are relevant to understanding and analysing decolonisation efforts through the creative engagement of music and language in that context. They provide insights and are critically relevant to understanding certain aspects of these topics. In this study, the researcher draws on the impact of both Western and Igbo musical cultures as the fundamental creative inspiration of African (Nigerian) Art music composer "Onyeji" in the composition of "*Abigbo* for Modern Orchestra" and described his creative work as a decolonisation process, because of the ethnographic study of the indigenous *Abigbo* musical culture as a documentation, sustainability, and continuity effort. The fusion of the contrasting musical idioms from power distance perspectives showcased the colonisation experience of the Igbo people of Nigeria and its effect on the identity of indigenous Igbo people, as expressed in the composer's engagement with his indigenous language, musical instrument and creative elements and idioms inherent in the indigenous musical culture of the Mbaise people, expressed through Western Symphony. Knowing that culture is a complex and multifaceted concept, language and music in this study serve as cultural tools engaged. According to Vygotsky ((1986), learning and development occur through social interactions, and cultural artefacts and language play crucial roles in shaping our thinking and understanding. Therefore, applying these theories to the creative engagement of music and language within decolonisation processes, we explore how the social and cultural context of the music composition influences the production, reception, and interpretation of creative works as a channel of expression, resistance, identity formation, knowledge transmission and social interaction in the decolonisation context.

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