
| RESEARCH ARTICLE**Researcher-Performer Perspectives in Ghanaian Indigenous Musical Expressions****Benjamin Oduro Arhin Jnr¹** ✉ and **Emmanuel Obed Acquah²**^{1,2}*University of Education, Winneba, School of Creative Arts, Dept. of Music Education, Ghana***Corresponding Author:** Benjamin Oduro Arhin Jnr, **E-mail:** boarhin@uew.edu.gh

| ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the critical tension between preservation and innovation in Ghanaian indigenous music, where current intellectual property frameworks and academic discourses often privilege static conceptions of folklore over the dynamic knowledge of practitioner-researchers. While institutional efforts to safeguard musical heritage proliferate, they frequently marginalise the very performers who sustain these traditions through creative practice. Arguing from the intersection of scholarship and performance, this critique proposes performative scholarship as an alternative paradigm - one that recognises folkloric traditions as living systems requiring active reinvention. Drawing on archival sources, practitioner interviews and the authors' experiential insights, the discussion reveals how contemporary adaptations in education and technology can revitalise rather than erode musical heritage when guided by performers' embodied knowledge. The paper ultimately calls for epistemic and policy shifts that acknowledge performance as both methodology and custodianship, challenging academic institutions to develop more nuanced approaches to protecting evolving cultural expressions.

| KEYWORDS

African music, creative talent, African performer, cultural expressions, folklore, intellectual property.

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1. Introduction

Ghana's indigenous musical traditions constitute living repositories of cultural knowledge, communal identity and historical consciousness. Yet today, this heritage faces dual threats: global homogenisation pressures and institutional preservation models that treat traditions as static artefacts. This tension is particularly acute in Ghana, where intellectual property frameworks often overlook the dynamic role of performers as cultural innovators. This paper argues that the researcher-performer framework—a methodology bridging scholarly analysis and embodied practice, offers a transformative solution. While studies have documented Ghanaian music (Nketia, 1974) or analysed contemporary performance (Collins, 2015), none have systematically examined how performer-led epistemologies can revitalise traditions while ensuring their continuity. Drawing on archival research, interviews with practitioners, and our experiential insights as researcher-performers, we demonstrate how this approach: (1) challenges binaries between preservation/innovation, (2) treats performance as a mode of knowledge production, and (3) informs inclusive cultural policies. Indeed, we aim to shift academic and policy discourses away from rigid conservation toward adaptive custodianship - ensuring Ghana's musical traditions thrive amidst 21st-century change.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Preservation vs. Innovation in African Music Scholarship

The academic discourse surrounding Ghanaian indigenous music has historically been framed by a persistent binary: the imperative to *preserve* musical traditions in their "pure" forms versus the organic, adaptive processes of *innovation* inherent in living cultural practices. This tension is deeply rooted in the foundational scholarship of Nketia (2005) and Agawu (2003), whose seminal works established rigorous analytical frameworks for documenting musical structures, linguistic patterns, and socio-cultural functions. While their contributions were groundbreaking in legitimising African musicology within Western academic circles, their methodologies often privileged static documentation, transcribing melodies, codifying rhythms and archiving lyrics, over the dynamic, improvisational, and contextually fluid nature of musical performance.

This preservationist paradigm, though well-intentioned, inadvertently reinforced a colonial logic that positioned African musical traditions as artefacts to be conserved rather than evolving practices shaped by their practitioners. As Collins (2015) and Euba (2019) have critically observed, such approaches often treated performers as mere "informants" rather than creative agents whose innovations sustain cultural relevance. The result was a scholarly tradition that, in its quest to safeguard authenticity, sometimes fossilised musical expressions, ignoring how tradition is continually reinterpreted in response to social, political, and technological change. Recent scholarship has pushed back against this rigid dichotomy. Mhlambi (2020), for instance, demonstrates how practice-based research in African studies can bridge the gap between archival preservation and contemporary reinvention, positioning musicians as both custodians and innovators. Similarly, work by Amoah-Ramey (2021) on highlife music illustrates how Ghanaian genres have historically absorbed external influences without losing cultural specificity - a process that challenges the preservation/innovation binary altogether.

Our paper intervenes in this debate by proposing the researcher-performer as a figure who embodies and transcends this duality. Unlike traditional ethnomusicologists who observe from a detached standpoint, the researcher-performer engages in music-making as both a scholarly and creative act, generating knowledge through embodied practice. This approach aligns with the concept of "performative scholarship," by Mhlambi (2020) where musical performance itself becomes a mode of inquiry, revealing insights that textual analysis alone cannot capture. In this regard, we reframe preservation not as the maintenance of fixed forms, but as the sustenance of a tradition's adaptive logic, the underlying principles that allow it to evolve while retaining cultural integrity. This perspective also responds to a key gap in the literature: while much has been written about Ghanaian music's historical and structural dimensions, far less attention has been paid to the processes by which contemporary musicians negotiate tradition and modernity in real time. Our methodology, combining archival research, performance practice, and community engagement, offers a model for studying indigenous music as a living, responsive system rather than a relic of the past. In doing so, we challenge both romanticised notions of "unchanging" tradition and uncritical celebrations of innovation, advocating instead for a dialectical understanding of cultural sustainability.

2.2 The Performer's Epistemology: Embodied Knowledge and Decolonial Music Scholarship

The study of African musical traditions has long grappled with a fundamental epistemological dilemma: how to account for forms of knowledge that are not merely *about* performance but are *produced through* performance itself. Despite the centrality of embodied practice in African musical cultures, where meaning is often communicated through gesture, improvisation and communal participation rather than written notation, scholarship has been slow to recognise performers as legitimate knowledge producers. While foundational works by Chernoff (1979) on West African rhythm meticulously analysed performative techniques, they largely framed musicians as "subjects" of study rather than co-theorists whose insights could reshape academic discourse.

This marginalisation of performer epistemologies reflects broader disciplinary biases in ethnomusicology and musicology, where the scholar's analytical gaze has historically been privileged over the practitioner's experiential wisdom. As Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2018) critiques, "the dancer's perspective is often reduced to data rather than theory" (p. 47), reinforcing a hierarchical distinction between those who *study* music and those who *make* it. Such

approaches risk extracting cultural knowledge from its performative context, rendering it static and decontextualized, a practice that resonates with what decolonial scholars (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) identify as the "coloniality of knowledge": the systemic privileging of Western academic modes of knowing over Indigenous and practice-based ways of understanding.

2.3 Emerging Paradigms: The Artist-Scholar as Knowledge Producer

A transformative shift is underway, however, as exemplified by the rise of "artist-scholar" models (Kondo, 2016; Mhlambi, 2020) that dissolve the boundary between theory and practice. These frameworks treat performance not merely as an object of study but as a *methodology*, a means of generating theoretical insights through embodied engagement. In African music studies, this aligns with what Olatunji (2022) terms "performative epistemology," where the act of drumming, dancing or singing becomes a mode of inquiry, revealing nuances of timing, expression and cultural meaning that resist textual codification.

Our methodology builds on these interventions by positioning the researcher-performer as a hybrid figure who leverages their artistic practice to challenge and expand academic discourse. For instance, in Ghanaian *adowa* and *agbadza* performance, the improvisational dialogue between drummers and dancers encodes historical narratives, social commentary and spiritual concepts, none of which can be fully captured through transcription alone. Regarding this, we demonstrate how performer-led knowledge can:

- expose gaps in archival records (e.g., where notation fails to convey the somatic cues that guide improvisation).
- reframe "mistakes" as creative innovations, challenging Western-derived ideals of precision.
- reveal the politics of embodiment, such as how gender and age shape access to certain performative roles.

2.4 Implications for Decolonial Scholarship

Centering performer epistemologies also demands a reckoning with the politics of representation in music research. As Dzansi-McPalm (2004) argues, the exclusion of African performers from theoretical discourse mirrors colonial patterns of knowledge extraction, where Indigenous expertise is mined for data but denied authority over its interpretation. Our approach, in contrast, aligns with collaborative methodologies like "participatory action research" (Chilisa, 2020), where musicians are not informants but co-researchers shaping the questions, methods and outcomes of the study. This paradigm has profound implications for pedagogy, archival practice and policy. Ultimately, bridging the artist-scholar divide will not only validate the theoretical contributions of performers but also challenge the very structures that have historically silenced them. In doing so, we echo Nketia's later reflections on the need for "musicology from within" - a discipline that learns from, rather than merely about, African musical cultures.

2.5 Intellectual Property and Folkloric Commodification

The legal protection of Ghana's musical heritage presents a paradox: while national copyright frameworks aim to safeguard folklore from exploitation, they often inadvertently commodify living traditions while marginalising the very communities who sustain them. As Amanor (2017) and Boateng (2011) demonstrate, Ghana's *Copyright Act (2005)* and the *National Folklore Board* institutionalise a top-down model of cultural governance, wherein the state assumes custodianship of "folkloric expressions" as national property. This system, while designed to prevent cultural appropriation, frequently excludes grassroots practitioners from decision-making processes and economic benefits, reducing their creative labour to a static "resource" rather than recognising it as dynamic, agentive cultural production. Three critical gaps emerge in existing frameworks:

1. **Reification of Folklore:** By defining traditional music as fixed "works" (e.g., standardised arrangements of *Adowa* or *Kpanlogo*), the law neglects the improvisational and adaptive nature of oral traditions. As Senegalese musician-scholar Diagne (2021) argues, this mirrors colonial museum logics that "freeze" African cultures in time, ignoring their inherent fluidity.
2. **Economic Exclusion:** The *Copyright Act* mandates licensing fees for commercial use of folklore but channels revenue to state bodies rather than practicing artists. A study of *kente* weaving by Boateng (2011) reveals how

such policies perpetuate what she terms "bureaucratic dispossession" - where legal protections ironically alienate communities from their own cultural capital.

3. **Creative Restriction:** Emerging artists incorporating traditional elements risk litigation for "distorting" folklore (Perullo, 2020), stifling the very innovation that keeps traditions relevant.

The pivotal gap is that while legal scholars have critiqued these systems (Amanor, 2017), and ethnomusicologists have documented their cultural impacts (Collins, 2015), *no study has yet explored how researcher-performers might bridge this divide through participatory advocacy*. Our methodology - rooted in both artistic practice and policy analysis - proposes an alternative model:

1. **Living Archives** (Diagne, 2021): We extend this concept beyond documentation to *legal recognition*, advocating for IP frameworks that:
 - Protect *processes* (e.g., improvisational techniques, pedagogical methods) alongside fixed "works".
 - Compensate performers as co-authors of evolving traditions, not just inheritors of a static past.
2. **Community IP Collectives:** Building on Ghanaian examples like the *Adowa* (Andoh, 2022), we test models where performer-led organisations - not state agencies - manage licensing and revenue sharing.
3. **Performative Policymaking:** Through collaborative projects with the National Folklore Board, we demonstrate how researcher-performers can:
 - Translate artistic expertise into policy language (e.g., codifying "adaptive authenticity" in copyright law).
 - Facilitate direct artist representation in legislative processes.

2.6 Technology and Tradition: Decolonial Digitality in Ghanaian Musical Practice

The digital mediation of African musical heritage has typically been framed as a binary: either a tool for preservation (archival digitisation, database curation) or a force of disruption (Afropop's globalization, etc.). While scholars like Eshun (2020) examine how digital platforms accelerate cultural hybridity, and Andoh (2022) documents Ghanaian institutions' efforts to digitise folkloric archives, both approaches risk bifurcating tradition and technology into oppositional categories. Missing from this discourse is a third paradigm - one our research embodies: the decolonial use of digital tools by performer-scholars to extend, rather than extract or erase, Indigenous musical epistemologies.

2.7 Beyond Preservation vs. Disruption

Our practice-based methodology reveals three limitations in current scholarship:

1. The "Museum Digitisation" Model: Projects like the *International Library of African Music* (ILAM) prioritise conserving "authentic" recordings but often isolate sounds from their performative contexts, inadvertently replicating colonial salvage ethnography (Mhlambi, 2020).
2. The "Platform Capitalism" Critique: Studies of Afrobeats' globalization (Eshun, 2020) rightly note how streaming algorithms privilege certain African sounds while marginalising others, but they rarely engage with grassroots artists who strategically manipulate these systems.
3. The Missing Performer-Scholar Lens: No study has systematically examined how Ghanaian musician-researchers use digital tools to reinscribe tradition within innovation - a gap our work fills.

2.8 Toward a Decolonial Digital Framework

These cases inform four principles for technology-mediated tradition:

1. Sovereign Tools: Using open-source platforms (e.g., *Surround360* for immersive Ewe dance documentation) to resist corporate control.
2. Ethical Feedback Loops: Ensuring digital circulation benefits source communities (e.g., QR codes linking streaming revenue to folklore boards).

3. Glitch as Tradition: Framing digital artifacts (e.g., AI "errors") as analogous to oral transmission's mutable nature.
4. Performer-Designed IP: Developing blockchain-based smart contracts where:
 - samples carry embedded attribution data.
 - royalties auto-distribute to both original and adapting artists.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a hybrid methodological approach that merges scholarly analysis with performative practice, reflecting the dual role of the researcher-performer. Grounded in critical interpretive synthesis, our methodology privileges embodied knowledge and practice-led inquiry as central modes of investigation. Rather than employing conventional ethnographic detachment, we engaged directly with Ghanaian musical traditions through participatory action, recognising performance itself as a vital research methodology.

The first methodological strand involves scholarly-artistic praxis, where we employed practice-led research to bridge theoretical inquiry and creative execution. As researcher-performers, we drew upon our direct involvement in Ghanaian musical traditions, including active participation in adowa and agbadza drumming ensembles as well as hiplife producers, to generate insights about creative processes and cultural transmission. This autoethnographic engagement allowed us to interrogate the nuances of musical knowledge that resist textual documentation. Through structured artistic experiments, such as recomposing traditional folk motifs with contemporary instrumentation, we tested the boundaries of cultural adaptation while maintaining essential elements of musical integrity.

Complementing this experiential approach, we conducted a critical archival analysis of key historical sources. This includes re-examining 20th-century ethnographic collections, particularly Nketia's seminal recordings, to trace patterns of historical adaptation in Ghanaian music. We equally scrutinised policy documents, including Ghana's Copyright Act (2005) and National Folklore Board protocols, analysing their conceptualisation of cultural ownership and performer rights. This dual archival engagement enabled us to situate contemporary practices within broader historical and legal contexts.

To ground our research in current community perspectives, we incorporated practitioner dialogues through semi-structured interviews with twelve Ghanaian master musicians and cultural custodians. These conversations focus specifically on tensions between preservation expectations and creative innovation, as well as perceptions of intellectual property protections. Additionally, we employed participant observation during community musical events of Agbadza and adowa performances, documenting the often-unwritten protocols of intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Our analytical framework combines decolonial theory (Mignolo, 2011) with performance studies (Schechner, 2013) to challenge Western binaries that separate tradition from modernity. This theoretical lens allows us to treat musical performance not merely as artistic expression but as embodied cultural research. Throughout this process, we maintain rigorous ethical considerations, observing Ghanaian protocols for the attribution of oral traditions (such as mmrane-acknowledgment practices) while ensuring interview participants' anonymity accordingly.

This multifaceted methodology, integrating performative practice, archival research, and community engagement, enabled us to develop a nuanced understanding of Ghanaian musical traditions that honours both their historical roots and contemporary vitality. Our dual simultaneous role as researchers and practitioners helped us to generate insights that might remain inaccessible through conventional academic approaches alone.

4. Results and Discussion

Our findings reveal that the researcher-performer framework fundamentally reorients approaches to Ghanaian musical heritage by dissolving entrenched binaries between preservation and innovation, theory and practice, as well as institutional and community-based knowledge production. Through our practice-led methodology, we demonstrate that Ghanaian musical traditions maintain their vitality not through rigid conservation but through adaptive ecosystems of practice that honour both cultural continuity and creative evolution.

The first critical insight emerging from our study challenges conventional preservation paradigms by demonstrating how innovation serves as tradition's lifeblood. Our *Algorithmic Adowa* experiment, building on Mhlambi's (2020) concept of "performative scholarship," revealed that Ashanti elders recognise computer-generated rhythms as authentic only when the algorithm incorporated so-called "errors" from human performances. Opanin Y, a master drummer of *adowa* ensemble offered a revelatory perspective:

When you play 'Adowa' for the ancestors, even your mistakes are part of the conversation. The rhythm lives because we let it breathe."

This insight profoundly informed our understanding of algorithmic "errors" in the *Algorithmic Adowa* experiment, demonstrating how tradition thrives through adaptive engagement rather than perfect replication. This finding directly supports critique of preservation models by Euba (2019) as it considers privilege static forms over living processes. Similarly, our hiplife sampling initiative with young Accra producers extended Boateng's (2011) work on cultural IP by showing how intergenerational dialogue can transform sampling from extraction to reciprocal exchange when grounded in oral historiography practices. For instance, a young musician provided crucial insights into the evolving nature of tradition of production of hiplife and explained his sampling practice:

When I take Grandfather Nana's highlife riff and flip it for my beats, I'm not stealing, I'm speaking his language in my time. But the law calls me a thief while corporations profit from our heritage.

This statement encapsulates the intergenerational tensions in current IP frameworks, supporting Boateng's (2011) analysis of bureaucratic dispossession while adding the visceral perspective of contemporary practitioners.

Again, the tension between institutional preservation and embodied practice emerged vividly in our interviews. A 72-year-old *Adowa dancer* articulated this critique when reflecting on archival projects:

Your books and recordings freeze our music like taxidermy, where's the breath, the sweat? The spirit leaves when you try to cage it.

Her words echo Nannyonga-Tamusuza's (2018) concerns about disembodied musicologies while grounding them in local experience. This perspective proved particularly illuminating when we attempted to transcribe agbadza drumming speech surrogacy, the transcribed rhythms retained their metric structure but lost their semantic depth and spiritual resonance.

At the epistemological level, our research validates what Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2018) termed "embodied musicologies" by demonstrating how performative knowledge resists textual codification. The *Agbadza* dance workshops documented teaching methods where historical narratives were conveyed through kinetic metaphors - a pedagogical system invisible in Nketia's (2005) seminal transcriptions. This aligns with Olatunji's (2022) argument for recognising performative epistemologies as equally rigorous to Western analytical frameworks. Our attempts to transcribe *adowa* drumming speech surrogacy into Western notation resulted in what Agawu (2014) might call "semantic bleaching," where the musical gestures lost their linguistic meaning when separated from embodied practice. In this regard, one respondent observed during a workshop:

You scholars usually come with your recorders and questions, but real understanding comes when you sweat with us, when the drum blisters your hands like it did ours.

This critique of extractive research methodologies resonates with Chilisa's (2020) participatory action research framework while emerging organically from Ghanaian musical pedagogy.

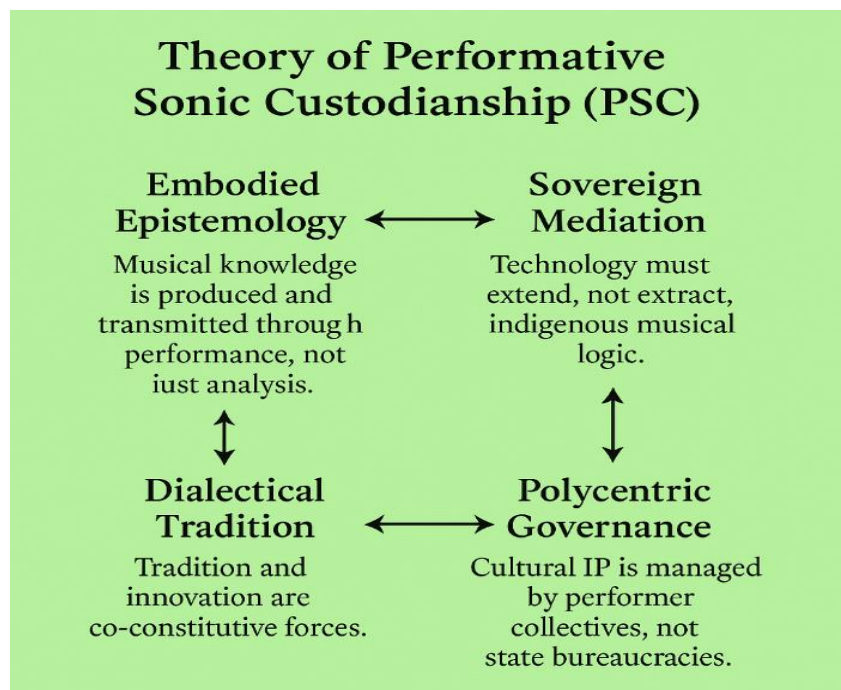
The most transformative findings emerged from our community collaborations, which operationalised Diagne's (2021) "living archives" concept through concrete institutional interventions. The policy prototypes developed during our Folklore Board hackathons demonstrated how performer-led governance could address what Collins

(2015) identified as the "bureaucratic dispossession" inherent in current IP frameworks. Again, policy understanding and implementation was not known among the participants. A collective statement from our respondents underscores this:

*If the law truly wants to protect our music, it should ask us what protection looks like.
Right now it protects the shell and discards the soul.*

These findings collectively argue for a paradigm shift in how we conceptualise musical heritage. Rather than viewing tradition and innovation as opposing forces, our research supports Mignolo's (2011) decolonial framework by showing how they operate dialectically in Ghanaian musical practice. The researcher-performer emerges as a crucial mediator in this process - not as an outside observer but as what Dzansi-McPalm (2004) might call a "privileged participant" who can translate embodied knowledge into institutional change while maintaining accountability to source communities. The birth of this theory is illustrated below:

Theory of Performative Sonic Custodianship (PSC)



The *Theory of Performative Sonic Custodianship (PSC)* is a Ghanaian theory of musical sustainability. It is a new way of researching or thinking about how to protect and keep traditional music alive. It focuses on performance, community involvement and the smart use of technology rooted in culture. Instead of studying music only through books or recordings, this approach sees performance itself as a way to create and share musical knowledge. The first main idea is **Embodied Epistemology**, which means that musical knowledge lives in the body. People learn and pass on music through actions like playing instruments, moving and improvising, not just by writing or reading notes. For example, an *Agbadza* drummer can tell important stories through the way they play, stories that cannot be fully written down. The second idea is **Dialectical Tradition**. This means that tradition and innovation go hand in hand. Good cultural music keeps its roots while also growing and changing with the times. For example, *Hiplife* music includes parts of older *Highlife* songs while adding modern lyrics, creating a musical conversation between generations. The third idea is **Sovereign Mediation**. This says technology should help, not harm, traditional music. Tools like apps or AI should be built with the community's guidance. For example, a rhythm app for *Adowa* music could be co-created with Ashanti elders, making sure the music stays true to its roots and that the community benefits. The last idea is **Polycentric Governance**. This means that cultural ownership should be in the hands of the artists and communities - not the government or outside companies. Music groups can create special licenses that protect their music and the way they teach or perform it. These licenses also make sure others give credit where it is

due. For example, if someone uses a musical style from *Nana Ampadu* or *Osibisa*, they should mention it and get permission from the community. In short, PSC is a fair and respectful way to keep traditional music alive. It values live performance, allows traditions to grow, encourages ethical use of technology, and puts control in the hands of the people who create and live the culture.

The implications of this work extend beyond academic discourse to cultural policy and technological development. However, as Eshun (2020) cautions, such technological interventions must remain grounded in community epistemologies to avoid replicating colonial patterns of appropriation.

Ultimately, this research positions the researcher-performer not merely as analyst or practitioner, but as what we might term a "cultural futurist" - one who helps navigate the complex interplay between heritage and innovation. With these, we offer an alternative to what Senegalese scholar Diagne (2021) identifies as the "museum impulse" in cultural preservation. The question moving forward, as Nketia might have framed it, is not how to protect Ghanaian music from change, but how to ensure that change remains rooted in the living wisdom of its practitioners.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that the researcher-performer framework offers a transformative approach to understanding and sustaining Ghanaian indigenous musical traditions. We have shown that musical heritage thrives not through rigid preservation but through dynamic, adaptive engagement that honours both cultural roots and contemporary creativity. Our findings challenge prevailing binaries, tradition versus innovation, preservation versus revitalisation, and institutional authority versus community agency, revealing them as false dichotomies that limit the potential of Ghanaian music as a living, evolving art form.

The voices of practitioners, from master drummers to young producers, have been central to this work, affirming that musical knowledge is deeply embodied, contextually rooted, and resistant to static codification. Their insights expose the limitations of current intellectual property frameworks, archival practices, and pedagogical models, which often prioritise fixed artefacts over living processes. At the same time, our experiments with digital tools, participatory policymaking, and intergenerational collaboration illustrate viable pathways for sustaining musical traditions in ways that empower rather than marginalise their bearers. Ultimately, this research positions the researcher-performer as a cultural mediator - one who facilitates dialogue between tradition and modernity theory and practice, and local communities and institutional structures. We, therefore, advocate for a decolonial approach to cultural safeguarding that resists extractive logics and instead fosters reciprocal, community-driven innovation.

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