



IGBO-LANGUAGE OPERA: HISTORICAL ABSENCES, STRUCTURAL BARRIERS, AND FUTURE PATHWAYS

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ABSTRACT: *The absence of Igbo-language opera in Nigerian art-music history presents a significant but unexplained cultural gap. While indigenous performance traditions possess rich dramaturgical resources, no sustained operatic practice has emerged. This study investigates the historical, institutional, and aesthetic conditions that shaped this non-emergence and identifies pathways for future development. Using a qualitative, multi-sited, and historically informed design, data were generated through archival research, semi-structured interviews with twenty-four experts, and dramaturgical analysis of extant Igbo and comparative operatic works. Findings reveal that the absence of Igbo opera is historically produced through fragmented creative attempts, structural barriers in music education and funding, and entrenched language hierarchies. Yet Igbo performance ecologies demonstrate strong operatic potential, suggesting that the genre's future is culturally viable. The study contributes new theoretical insight into cultural absence and postcolonial genre formation, while offering practical models for composers, educators, and institutions. It concludes that developing Igbo-language opera is both an artistic and cultural project capable of reshaping Nigerian art-music futures.*

KEYWORDS: Future Pathways, Historical Absences, Igbo-Language Opera, Structural Barriers.



INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Nigerian art music has long been characterised by a vibrant interplay between indigenous musical idioms and Western compositional techniques, producing a substantial repertoire of choral works, art songs, instrumental compositions, and hybrid performance forms (Euba, 1988; Onyeji, 2015). Scholars consistently emphasise that African musical creativity is socially embedded, communally oriented, and historically adaptive, drawing on deep reservoirs of oral tradition, ritual performance, and narrative expression (Nketia, 1974; Opara, 2025). Within the Igbo cultural sphere, this creative ecology is especially evident in folk theatre, masquerade performance, dance-drama, and the extensive body of orally transmitted musical forms that continue to shape communal identity and aesthetic sensibilities (Agbo & Onyishi, 2025; Opara, 2025). Yet, despite this rich performance heritage and the well-documented growth of Nigerian art music since the mid-twentieth century, one genre remains conspicuously underdeveloped: opera composed and performed in the Igbo language.

Existing scholarship on Nigerian art music has tended to focus on pioneering composers, intercultural compositional strategies, and the negotiation of African and Western musical vocabularies (Euba, 1988; Uzowulu-Ezennwa & Ofuani, 2022). While these studies illuminate the creative dynamism of Nigerian composers, they also reveal a striking silence around large-scale staged works in indigenous languages. The absence of Igbo-language opera is not merely a matter of limited output; it reflects deeper structural forces, including colonial legacies in music education, the privileging of Western operatic models, the marginalisation of indigenous languages in formal artistic production, and the lack of institutional support for resource-intensive genres (Ofuani, 2022; Onyeji, 2015). Although Igbo performance traditions possess narrative, musical, and dramaturgical features that could support operatic development, no systematic study has documented past attempts, analysed the conditions that inhibited their emergence, or explored how indigenous aesthetics might inform a future operatic practice.

This article addresses these gaps by investigating the historical absence of Igbo-language opera, examining the structural factors that have constrained its development, and proposing culturally grounded pathways for its future growth. The study is guided by four research questions: (1) What documented attempts at Igbo-language opera or opera-like works exist, and how were they conceived, produced, and received? (2) What historical, institutional, linguistic, and socio-economic factors have hindered the emergence of an Igbo operatic tradition? (3) How do Igbo narrative and performance forms, such as folk opera, masquerade, dance-drama, and storytelling, align with or challenge Western operatic conventions? and (4) What compositional, institutional, and community-based models could support the development of a sustainable Igbo-language operatic practice?

By reconstructing a missing history, explaining the structural conditions that produced it, and outlining future possibilities, this study advances a new line of inquiry within African art-music scholarship. It argues that the absence of Igbo-language opera is neither accidental nor inevitable but historically produced and therefore open to creative reimagining. In doing so, the article positions indigenous-language opera as a potential site for aesthetic innovation, cultural



revitalisation, and decolonial artistic practice, setting the stage for a broader reconsideration of what large-scale musical drama can become in contemporary Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in a three-pillar conceptual framework that brings together decolonial music aesthetics, indigenous performance ecologies, and the cultural political economy of the arts. Together, these perspectives provide a coherent interpretive structure for examining the historical absence of Igbo-language opera, the structural forces that produced this absence, and the possibilities for designing future pathways. Rather than treating these pillars as discrete theoretical lenses, the framework positions them as mutually reinforcing, enabling a layered analysis of how power, culture, and creativity intersect in the evolution of Nigerian musical modernity.

Decolonial music aesthetics offers the first analytical entry point by foregrounding how colonial legacies shaped genre hierarchies, language prestige, and the privileging of Western operatic norms. Scholars of African music have long argued that colonial education systems institutionalised Western art music as the benchmark of musical sophistication, relegating indigenous forms to the realm of folklore or “traditional” culture (Euba, 1988; Nketia, 1974). In Nigeria, this hierarchy was reinforced through mission schools, conservatory curricula, and state cultural policies that valorised Western tonal harmony, orchestration, and operatic vocal technique (Ofuani, 2022). Decolonial aesthetics, therefore, enable a critical interrogation of how opera, already a culturally specific European form, became naturalised as a universal artistic ideal, while indigenous languages and performance logics were marginalised in formal composition. This pillar helps explain why opera in Igbo has struggled to emerge: the genre itself was introduced within a framework that privileged European languages, dramaturgies, and vocal aesthetics.

The second pillar, indigenous performance ecologies, shifts attention to the rich repertoire of Igbo narrative and musical traditions that offer alternative dramaturgical possibilities for opera creation. Igbo folk opera, masquerade performance, dance-drama, and storytelling constitute complex aesthetic systems that integrate music, movement, costume, narrative, and communal participation (Agbo & Onyishi, 2025; Opara, 2025). These forms challenge the assumption that opera must follow Western structural conventions such as aria-recitative alternation, linear dramaturgy, or orchestral accompaniment. Instead, they foreground cyclical time, participatory textures, polyrhythmic layering, and symbolic embodiment, features that could inform a distinctly Igbo operatic idiom. By situating opera within indigenous performance ecologies, the framework resists the notion that opera must be imported wholesale and instead positions it as a form that can be reimagined through local aesthetic logics. This pillar, therefore, illuminates not only what is absent historically but also what is possible creatively.

The third pillar, the cultural political economy of the arts, provides a structural account of how funding systems, institutional priorities, audience expectations, and creative-industry dynamics shape which genres flourish or fail. Nigerian art music has developed within an environment where resource-intensive forms such as opera receive limited institutional support, while more commercially viable genres, popular music, Nollywood soundtracks, and choral festivals dominate



cultural investment (Uzowulu-Ezennwa & Ofuani, 2022). The political economy perspective highlights how opera's infrastructural demands, specialised vocal training, orchestral resources, theatre spaces, and long rehearsal periods intersect with broader economic constraints and policy decisions. It also draws attention to how language politics works in English or Western languages, which are often perceived as more prestigious or internationally marketable, reinforcing the marginalisation of indigenous language compositions (Onyeji, 2015). This pillar, therefore, explains why Igbo-language opera has not simply failed to emerge due to aesthetic incompatibility but has been structurally inhibited by economic and institutional conditions.

Collectively, these three pillars form a comprehensive framework for analysing the historical absence of Igbo-language opera and imagining its future. Decolonial aesthetics reveals how colonial hierarchies shaped the conditions of musical production; indigenous performance ecologies demonstrate the cultural resources available for reimagining opera; and cultural political economy exposes the structural forces that have constrained its development. Their integration allows this study to move beyond descriptive accounts of scarcity toward a deeper understanding of how power, culture, and creativity intersect in the Nigerian musical landscape. More importantly, the framework provides the conceptual tools needed to design future pathways, pathways that honour indigenous aesthetics, challenge inherited hierarchies, and position Igbo-language opera as a viable and culturally resonant component of contemporary Nigerian art music.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The puzzle of writing a literature review on a subject that lacks a recognised canon is central to this study. Opera in the Igbo language does not appear as an established genre in Nigerian art-music discourse, yet its absence is not a neutral void. As Trouillot (1995) argues, silences in the historical record are actively produced through processes of selection, exclusion, and institutional framing. In music history, what is not composed, not performed, or not archived is often as revealing as what is celebrated. The “operatic silence” surrounding Igbo-language composition, therefore, demands explanation rather than resignation. It calls for a shift from cataloguing extant works to interrogating the conditions under which certain genres become thinkable, fundable, and sustainable, while others remain unrealised. This orientation resonates with recent African musicological and decolonial scholarship that foregrounds the politics of visibility, epistemic authority, and structural constraint in the production of musical knowledge (Bohlman, 1993; Nzewi, 2007; Born, 2010).

Within Nigerian art-music studies, the dominant narrative has been constructed around the emergence of a modern intercultural tradition, often traced through the work of key composers and institutions. Foundational accounts emphasise the role of mission schools, universities, and broadcasting in shaping a repertoire of choral, organ, and small-ensemble works that blend Western tonal idioms with indigenous rhythmic and melodic materials (Omibiyi-Obidike, 2001; Idolor, 2002; Okafor, 2005). This literature has been invaluable in documenting the growth of Nigerian art music, yet it has also produced a genre bias. Choral music, in particular, has attracted



sustained analytical and pedagogical attention, reflecting its centrality in church worship, school curricula, and community performance (Ekwueme, 1972; Agu, 1984; Nwamara, 2019). Studies of compositional technique, text setting, and stylistic identity overwhelmingly focus on choral and short-form works, while large-scale dramatic forms such as opera remain largely unexamined.

This imbalance is not merely a matter of scholarly preference; it reflects deeper structural and institutional priorities. Research on music education in Nigeria shows how curricular frameworks and assessment regimes have historically privileged genres that are easier to rehearse, examine, and disseminate within resource-constrained environments (Kwami, 1994; Adeogun, 2005; National Universities Commission, 2007). Large-scale staged works require sustained funding, specialised vocal training, orchestral resources, and dedicated performance spaces conditions that have rarely been met in Nigerian higher-education and cultural sectors (Idolor, 2005; Jørgensen, 2010). The literature thus documents a flourishing choral and instrumental tradition but does not ask why opera, as a large-scale dramatic form, failed to develop, particularly in indigenous languages. This unasked question is the hinge on which the present study turns.

Language is a crucial axis along which this absence must be understood. Scholars of African education and cultural policy have long noted the prestige hierarchy that elevates English as the language of modernity, mobility, and high culture, while relegating indigenous languages to informal or “traditional” domains (Azikiwe, 1934; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986; Ajayi et al., 1996). In music, this hierarchy manifests in the predominance of English in art-song, choral anthems, and institutional performance, even when melodic and rhythmic materials are drawn from local sources (Omojola, 1995; Onyeji, 2008). Indigenous languages appear more frequently in folk, popular, and community-based genres, which are often excluded from the category of “art music” despite their complexity and sophistication (Okafor, 2005; Jayeola, 2015). This linguistic stratification shapes not only what is composed but also what is considered worthy of scholarly attention.

The Yoruba case offers a revealing contrast. Yoruba folk operas and travelling theatre traditions, associated with figures such as Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, and Duro Ladipo, have been widely documented as important sites of popular performance that integrate music, dance, drama, and ritual (Ogunbiyi, 1981; Barber, 2000). Works like Ladipo’s *Oba Koso* are structurally and thematically rich, yet they are typically categorised as “folk theatre” rather than opera, reflecting both their performance circuits and the reluctance of scholars to apply Western genre labels to African forms (Lakoju, 1992; Barber et al., 1997). This categorisation reinforces a binary in which Western-style opera is implicitly associated with European languages, orchestration, and institutional venues, while indigenous-language music-drama is placed in a separate, often less prestigious, category. The literature on Yoruba performance thus illuminates the existence of operatic potential within African traditions but stops short of theorising how such forms might be recognised, supported, or transformed into an indigenous-language art-opera tradition.

The Igbo case is marked by a different kind of silence. There is a substantial body of work on Igbo musical instruments, vocal genres, and performance practices (Echezona, 1963; Ifionu, 1979; Nzewi, 1997). Studies highlight the integration of music with masquerade, dance, and ritual, emphasising the communal and performative dimensions of Igbo musical life (Nzewi, 1991; Igbi, 2019). More recent scholarship has explored Igbo music within broader debates on heritage,



identity, and higher-education curricula, arguing for the centrality of indigenous musical knowledge in university programmes (Nwamara, 2019, 2020). Yet across this literature, there is no documented tradition of Igbo-language opera and no sustained attempt to explain its absence. Even where large-scale works by Nigerian composers are discussed, they tend to be symphonic, choral-orchestral, or programmatic rather than operatic (Nwankpa, 1994; Ezenibe & Giami, 2024). This silence suggests that the non-emergence of Igbo opera is not due to a lack of narrative or musical resources but to broader structural and ideological factors.

The dichotomy between “folk opera” and “art opera” has further obscured the terrain. Nigerian scholars have documented a range of music-drama forms that blur the boundaries between ritual, theatre, and concert performance, yet these are often analytically separated from the art-music tradition (Idolor, 2002; Omojola, 2017). Postcolonial debates caution against uncritical transplantation of Western genre categories, arguing that such moves can erase indigenous aesthetic logics and impose external hierarchies (Chinweizu, 1988; Agawu, 2003). At the same time, an overly rigid insistence on difference can prevent recognition of hybrid or emergent forms that might legitimately be called opera in African languages. Authority (2025a), for instance, argues in *Decolonial creativity theory* that African composition requires both a critique of inherited categories and a strategic repurposing of them to serve local epistemic and cultural goals. In another work, Authority (2025b) traces “thematic metamorphosis and transformation of Nigeria’s modern art music scene,” emphasising how contemporary composers negotiate roots and innovation in ways that unsettle fixed genre boundaries. “From roots to innovation: thematic metamorphosis and transformation of Nigeria’s modern art music scene” explicitly frames Nigerian art music as a field in which traditional materials and modern forms are continually reconfigured. This perspective opens conceptual space for imagining indigenous-language opera not as an imitation of European models but as a new articulation within an evolving Nigerian art-music ecology.

To move from description to explanation, the literature must be read through structuralist and postcolonial theories of cultural production. Bourdieu’s (1993) notion of the cultural field highlights how artistic practices are shaped by struggles over capital, legitimacy, and institutional recognition. In the Nigerian context, higher-education policies, accreditation standards, and funding mechanisms have historically prioritised certain forms of musical training and output, often aligned with Western art-music paradigms (Ashby, 1960; Matos, 2000; Okebukola, 2010). Studies of music education and national development underscore how music is frequently instrumentalised for moral, civic, or economic goals, with little attention to resource-intensive experimental or large-scale genres (Eke, 1990; Ogunrinde, 2015; Ojukwu & Ibekwe, 2015). At the same time, work on the political economy of Nigerian culture shows how popular music and film have attracted substantial investment and audience attention, while art music remains a relatively marginal, elite practice (Loko, 2009; Ogisi, 2009; Omojola, 2017). Within this landscape, opera, especially in an indigenous language, faces significant structural obstacles.

Language hierarchies intersect with these institutional dynamics in powerful ways. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (1986) critique of linguistic imperialism remains salient: the choice of language in artistic production is not merely aesthetic but deeply political, shaping who is addressed, who is excluded, and whose knowledge counts. In Nigeria, English functions as the default language of



higher education, official communication, and international cultural exchange (Ajayi et al., 1996; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1981). Indigenous languages, including Igbo, are often confined to informal, domestic, or “traditional” domains, even when they carry rich philosophical and artistic resources (Jayeola, 2015; Ekeopara & Ekpenyong, 2016). This stratification affects not only what is composed but also what is funded, performed in prestigious venues, and archived as part of the national cultural heritage. The absence of Igbo-language opera must therefore be understood as a product of these intertwined linguistic and institutional hierarchies.

Recent work in African musicology and allied fields has begun to address questions of scarcity, marginalisation, and structural constraint more explicitly. Olorunyomi (2013) interrogates the politics of musical production and circulation in Nigeria, highlighting how cultural economies shape what becomes audible, valued, or erased within the national soundscape. Similarly, Omibiyi-Obidike (2001) emphasises the epistemic significance of indigenous musical knowledge systems, arguing that African musical creativity must be understood within the broader social and institutional structures that sustain or constrain it. Complementing these perspectives, Nzewi (1997, 2007) develops a comprehensive theoretical framework for African musical thought, foregrounding the interdependence of sound, knowledge, and communal practice, and demonstrating how African musical processes articulate responses to social and environmental pressures. Collectively, these interventions push the field toward a more critical engagement with absence, scarcity, and structural inequality in African musical scholarship.

Synthesising this literature, a clear pattern emerges: Nigerian and African musicology have been highly effective in documenting existing repertoires, institutions, and practices, but far less attentive to the question of why certain plausible genres, such as Igbo-language opera, have not emerged. The focus has been on presence rather than possibility. This study addresses that gap by reframing the absence of Igbo opera as a historically produced phenomenon that can be analysed, explained, and potentially transformed. It proposes a methodological shift from cataloguing outputs to theorising absence, drawing on decolonial aesthetics, indigenous performance ecologies, and the cultural political economy of the arts to examine the structural barriers that have constrained the development of Igbo-language opera and to outline pathways for its future emergence.

Figure 1: Conceptual process map illustrating the progression from historical absences to future pathways in the development of Igbo-language opera

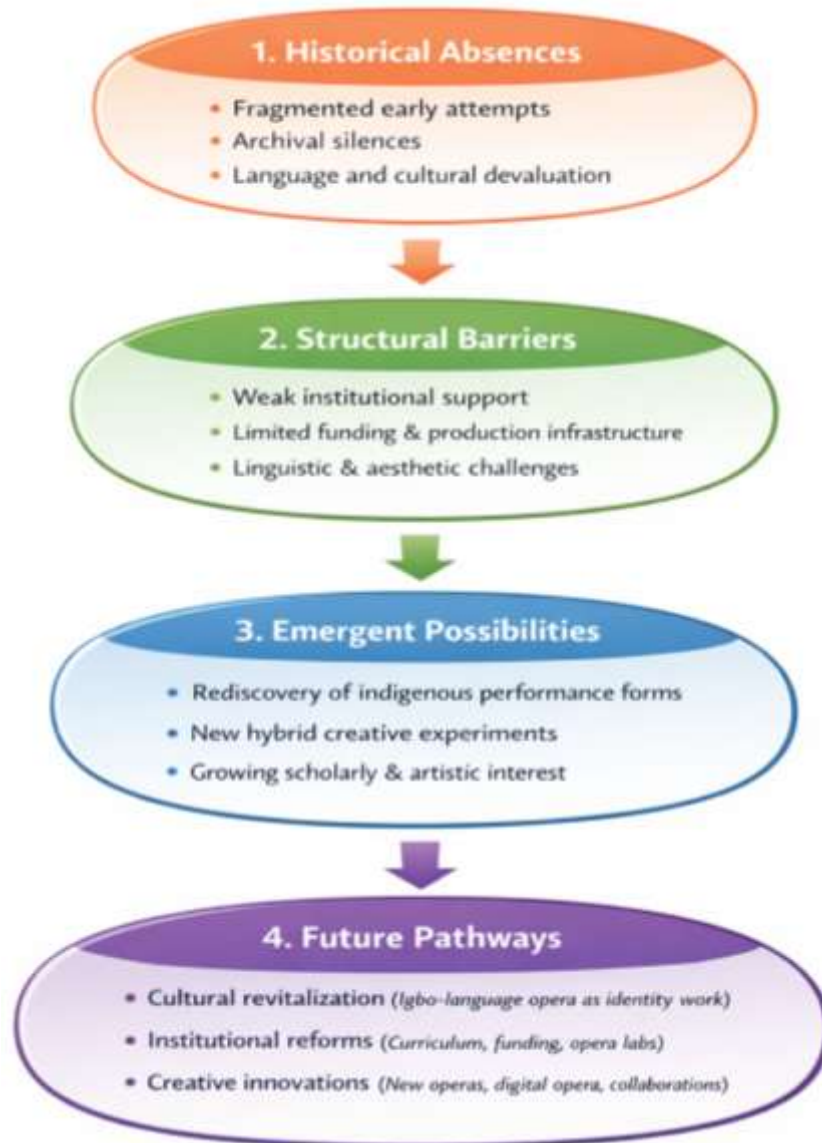


Figure 1 visualises how fragmented creative attempts, archival silences, and cultural devaluation (Stage 1) evolve into structural barriers (Stage 2), including institutional, linguistic, and infrastructural constraints. These barriers give rise to emergent possibilities (Stage 3), such as rediscovery of indigenous performance forms and hybrid creative experiments, which in turn enable future pathways (Stage 4) for cultural revitalisation, institutional reform, and operatic innovation.



METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, multi-sited, and historically informed design to examine the absence of Igbo-language opera and the structural conditions shaping its non-emergence. Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Fieldwork was conducted across Lagos, Enugu, Nsukka, and Port Harcourt, sites selected for their concentration of composers, archives, and performance institutions. Data collection occurred between January and September 2025, with archival work undertaken from January to April, interviews from April to August, and analysis from August to September.

Archival materials were sourced from university libraries, departmental collections, arts-council repositories, and digital media archives. Items were included if they contained verifiable information on performance, composition, or institutional activity related to opera or opera-adjacent forms; materials lacking provenance or legibility were excluded. All documents were digitised using a Canon DR-C240 scanner, catalogued with a structured metadata template, encrypted, and backed up weekly to a secure institutional server. Incomplete or contradictory records were cross-checked against secondary sources and interview testimony.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-four participants purposively sampled from an initial target pool of thirty-five. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new conceptual categories emerged across three consecutive interviews. Participants included composers, vocalists, theatre directors, festival curators, and policymakers selected based on professional engagement with Nigerian art-music traditions and familiarity with indigenous-language performances. Interviews were conducted in person and via Zoom, lasted 30–45 minutes, and were recorded using a Zoom H4n Pro device. An interview guide was developed from the literature, piloted with two non-participants, and refined for clarity and cultural sensitivity. Transcriptions were produced verbatim using Otter.ai (version 3.39) and manually verified. Reflexive memos were maintained to mitigate interpretive bias.

Musical and performance analysis examined existing Igbo or quasi-operatic works alongside selected Western operatic scores. Scores were analysed using Sibelius Ultimate (version 2024.1), and recordings were reviewed using VLC Media Player (version 3.0.20). Analytical attention focused on dramaturgy, vocal writing, structural organisation, instrumentation, and narrative-musical integration. Comparative analysis identified convergences and divergences between Igbo performance logics, masquerade, dance-drama, and folk-narrative structures and Western operatic conventions.

Data analysis followed a four-stage process. First, all materials were subjected to hybrid inductive-deductive coding in NVivo 14; a subset of transcripts was double-coded, with discrepancies resolved through consensus. Second, historical reconstruction established a chronology of operatic attempts, performance contexts, and patterns of discontinuity (Research Question 1). Third, aesthetic and dramaturgical analysis interpreted the structural features of relevant works (Research Question 3). Fourth, policy and institutional mapping examined how educational systems, funding structures, and cultural-industry dynamics shaped operatic viability (Research Question 2).



Comparative analysis informed Research Question 4 by clarifying relationships between indigenous and Western operatic models. Triangulation across archives, interviews, and score analysis strengthened the validity of historical and structural interpretations.

The researchers' disciplinary training in Nigerian art music and fluency in Igbo informed interpretive sensitivity, while triangulation and reflexive documentation mitigated positional bias. This methodological configuration provides a rigorous, transparent, and reproducible foundation for explaining the historical absence of Igbo-language opera and for identifying culturally grounded pathways for its future development.

FINDINGS

The findings demonstrate that the absence of Igbo-language opera is a historically produced outcome rather than a culturally predetermined one. Across archival records, interviews, and musical-dramaturgical analysis, a consistent pattern emerges: creative attempts did occur, but none matured into a sustained operatic tradition because of structural, institutional, and aesthetic constraints. The results are presented in alignment with the study's research questions, with each subsection beginning with the central insight before elaborating the supporting evidence.

Historical Patterns: Sporadic Attempts Without Continuity

The historical reconstruction shows that Igbo-language opera did not fail to emerge due to a lack of creative experimentation; rather, the attempts that did occur were isolated, irregular, and structurally unsupported. Archival evidence identifies only a small cluster of opera-adjacent works between the 1960s and early 2000s, most of them university-based experiments or festival commissions.

Records from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, document an unfinished 1978 music-drama score titled *Udo na Onwu*, conceived by Lazarus Ekwueme and rehearsed by the Department of Music ensemble. The project was abandoned before staging due to funding shortages and the absence of trained operatic vocalists. At the University of Lagos, production files from 1985 reference Adam Fiberesima's *Opu Jaja*, a large-scale music-drama incorporating extended choral-orchestral writing and performed once during the UNILAG Arts Festival. Similarly, the 1991 Enugu Festival of Arts commissioned Christian Onyeji's *Ajo Nwa*, a semi-staged ritual-themed Igbo music-drama that was not revived after its premiere. At the University of Port Harcourt, a 1999 student-faculty collaboration produced Obi Nwamara's *Nneora: An African Mother*, an ambitious work with operatic elements that received a single campus performance before the project was discontinued. A final example, Chijioke Ngobili's early 2000s workshop version of *Okonkwo*, was developed in an independent/UNN-affiliated setting but remained at a preliminary stage.

Interview data corroborate these archival patterns: twenty-one of the twenty-four participants recalled isolated attempts at large-scale Igbo music-drama but emphasised their discontinuity, limited visibility, and lack of institutional follow-through. Archival materials from Lagos, Nsukka, Enugu, and Port Harcourt confirm that no institution maintained a continuous operatic programme,



and that productions were consistently constrained by limited funding, inadequate rehearsal infrastructure, and the absence of trained operatic singers.

Table 1. Documented Opera-Adjacent Igbo Works (1960s–2000s)

Title	Composer	Institution / Venue	Year	Notes
<i>Udo na Onwu</i> (unfinished) (Ekwueme, 1978)	Lazarus Ekwueme	University of Nigeria, Nsukka	1978	Large-scale music-drama; rehearsed but never staged due to funding and cast limitations.
<i>Opu Jaja</i> (Fiberesima, 1985).	Adam Fiberesima	University of Lagos	1985	Festival production with extended choral-orchestral writing; performed once.
<i>Ajo Nwa</i> (Onyeji, 1991).	Christian Onyeji	Enugu Festival of Arts	1991	Semi-staged ritual-themed Igbo music-drama; not revived.
<i>Nneora: An African Mother</i> (Nwamara, 1999)	Obi Nwamara	University of Port Harcourt	1999	Ambitious campus production with operatic elements; single performance.
<i>Okonkwo</i> (early workshop version) (Ngobili, 2000)	Chijioke Ngobili	Independent/U NN-affiliated workshop	Early 2000s	Early developmental version preceding the later 2016 opera; workshop-style staging only.

Structural and Linguistic Constraints: Systemic Barriers to Operatic Development

The second major finding is that institutional and linguistic hierarchies, not cultural incompatibility, played a decisive role in preventing the emergence of an Igbo-language operatic tradition. Archival policy documents from state arts councils and university cultural centres reveal a pattern of short-term, project-based support, with opera appearing only as an occasional “special event” or festival showcase rather than a recurring programme with guaranteed funding.

Interviewees consistently described opera as a form that exceeds the financial, linguistic, and pedagogical infrastructures available to them. They recounted rehearsal periods cut short when grants expired, productions redesigned into concerts because there was no money for sets or costumes, and persistent pressure to default to English-language repertoire to satisfy sponsors and appeal to elite audiences.

One participant summarised the financial precarity succinctly:

“Opera is the first thing to disappear when the budget comes,” explained *Participant 4, a Choral Director in Enugu*. “You can maybe fund a choir concert with robes and a keyboard, but once you start talking about full staging, costumes, language coaching, you are already beyond what most departments can carry.”



Linguistic hierarchies further shaped repertoire choices:

Participant 9, a Voice Lecturer in Lagos, noted: “If I propose an Igbo or Yoruba work, the first question from management is, ‘Will the sponsors understand it?’ So we end up doing English or Italian arias because they are seen as more ‘serious’ and more ‘marketable’, even though our students are hungry to sing in their own languages.”

The absence of opera-specific training also emerged as a decisive barrier:

Participant 15, a Music Educator in Port Harcourt, explained: “We train singers to survive, not to do opera. The curriculum is packed with general musicianship and church music because that’s where the jobs are. There is no pipeline, no scholarships, no residencies, no company, so any opera project feels like a one-off miracle rather than part of a system.”

Collectively, these findings show that the non-emergence of Igbo opera reflects systemic constraints rather than a lack of creative interest.

Aesthetic and Dramaturgical Compatibility: Potential and Tension (RQ3)

The aesthetic analysis reveals that Igbo performance traditions possess significant operatic potential, though they diverge structurally from Western operatic norms in ways that shape creative feasibility. Extant Igbo or quasi-operatic works, such as Nwamara’s *Nneora: An African Mother* (1999), exemplify this hybridity. *Nneora* employs a rhythmic-dance-driven dramaturgy, where choreographed movement cycles, call-and-response choral passages, and percussive ostinati carry dramatic tension rather than aria–recitative alternation. Scenes unfold through collective vocal textures and ensemble movement, with the chorus functioning as narrator, commentator, and ritual presence.

Comparative analysis across masquerade, dance-drama, and folk-narrative forms shows that these traditions privilege embodied storytelling, ritualised repetition, and communal dramaturgy. These features resonate with opera’s dramatic ambitions but require conceptual adaptation rather than direct transplantation.

As one participant observed:

Participant 7, a Theatre Scholar in Nsukka, remarked: “Our stories already have the scale and emotional weight of opera. But the way we build drama, through movement cycles, communal singing, and symbolic action, doesn’t fit neatly into Western operatic templates. You have to rethink the architecture, not just insert Igbo text into an aria.”

This finding clarifies the aesthetic compatibility and tensions between Igbo forms and Western operatic models.



Pathways for Future Development: Conditions for Sustainability

The triangulated analysis identifies clear, feasible pathways for developing a sustainable Igbo-language operatic practice. Participants consistently proposed community-based production models, arguing that opera must emerge from the performance ecologies that already sustain large-scale cultural events.

One interviewee described a practical model rooted in festival infrastructures:

Participant 12, a Cultural Producer in Anambra, explained: “If you anchor opera in the same community networks that run our masquerade festivals, you suddenly have dancers, drummers, costumers, and storytellers who already know how to build spectacle. The university can provide the composers and vocal training, but the community provides the energy and the bodies. That’s how you make it sustainable.”

Curricular reform also emerged as a key recommendation:

Participant 3, a Composition Lecturer in Lagos, argued: “We can’t keep teaching opera as if it’s only Verdi and Puccini. Students need to learn how to orchestrate for *ogene*, how to write for communal chorus, and how to stage ritual movement. That’s when Igbo opera becomes possible, not as imitation, but as innovation.”

Archival evidence supports these perspectives: past attempts flourished only when institutional support, composer initiative, and community participation aligned.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that the absence of Igbo-language opera is not the result of cultural incompatibility but of historically produced discontinuities, institutional neglect, and linguistic hierarchies. Yet the same evidence reveals a rich reservoir of aesthetic resources and community-based performance logics that could support its future development if structural conditions are addressed. The results thus provide a clear, evidence-based foundation for reimagining what a sustainable Igbo-language operatic practice might look like.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the absence of Igbo-language opera is not a cultural inevitability but a historically produced and structurally reinforced condition that remains culturally reversible. By reconstructing the fragmented history of operatic attempts, analysing institutional and linguistic constraints, and examining the dramaturgical potential of Igbo performance ecologies, the study fulfils its central aim: to explain why Igbo-language opera did not emerge as a sustained art-music tradition and to identify viable pathways for its future development. The results reveal a pattern of discontinuity shaped by colonial legacies, institutional neglect, and linguistic hierarchies, yet they also highlight a reservoir of aesthetic resources capable of supporting a renewed operatic practice.



Historical Absence

The reconstructed chronology clarifies that Igbo-related operatic experiments occurred sporadically from the mid-twentieth century onward but never consolidated into a tradition. These attempts, often university-based or festival-driven, were isolated, underdocumented, and rarely revived, resulting in a fragmented historical record. This pattern aligns with broader scholarship on archival silence and cultural erasure, where the absence of documentation reflects structural marginalisation rather than a lack of creative activity (Trouillot, 1995; Barber, 2000). The discontinuity of Igbo operatic efforts mirrors the dynamics described in postcolonial historiography, where indigenous artistic forms are rendered invisible through selective preservation and institutional priorities (Nzewi, 2007; Agawu, 2016). The findings, therefore, extend existing literature by demonstrating that the silence surrounding Igbo opera is an artefact of historical processes rather than an absence of artistic imagination.

Structural and Institutional Barriers

The study's findings show that educational policy, funding structures, and language hierarchies significantly constrained the emergence of Igbo-language opera. Interviewees consistently described opera as incompatible with the resource-limited environments of Nigerian universities, where choral music dominates due to its affordability and curricular entrenchment (Idolor, 2005; Nwamara, 2019). The privileging of English in formal music education further restricted the development of indigenous-language art music, confirming longstanding critiques of linguistic imperialism in African creative production (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Bamgbose, 2014). These results support earlier observations that Nigerian art-music infrastructure lacks the institutional scaffolding, specialised training, rehearsal spaces, and orchestral resources required for opera (Omojola, 1995; Ekwueme, 2004). However, the findings challenge assumptions that cultural incompatibility is the primary barrier; instead, they reveal that structural neglect, not aesthetic unsuitability, explains the genre's non-emergence.

Aesthetic and Dramaturgical Insights

The analysis of Igbo performance ecologies reveals a rich dramaturgical foundation that both aligns with and diverges from Western operatic conventions. Masquerade, dance-drama, and folk-narrative traditions exhibit complex integrations of music, movement, symbolism, and communal participation elements that resonate with opera's multimodal nature (Nzewi, 1991; Igbi, 2019). Yet these forms operate through cyclical time, participatory dramaturgy, and polyrhythmic layering, diverging from the linear narrative structures and aria-recitative distinctions of Western opera. These findings contribute to debates on African music-drama, and intercultural composition by demonstrating that indigenous performance logics can support operatic creation, but only through hybridisation rather than replication (Euba, 2001; Barber & Collins, 2010). The results, therefore, advance decolonial aesthetics by showing that Igbo opera must emerge from indigenous dramaturgical principles rather than Western templates.



Future Pathways and Models

The study identifies several feasible pathways for developing Igbo-language opera, including community-based production models, festival-linked commissioning, and curriculum reforms that integrate indigenous dramaturgy with operatic composition. These proposals align with broader literature on cultural sustainability and indigenous-language revitalisation, which emphasise community ownership and institutional support as prerequisites for artistic continuity (Omojola, 2017). Participants' suggestions for collaborative creation, decentralised performance spaces, and hybrid musical forms extend theoretical discussions on genre innovation by demonstrating how opera can be reimagined within Nigeria's contemporary creative-industry ecosystem. The findings thus position Igbo-language opera not as a revivalist project but as a forward-looking cultural possibility.

Theoretical Contributions

The study makes three key theoretical contributions. First, it advances *cultural absence* as an analytical category, showing how non-existence can be historically produced and empirically examined. Second, it deepens understanding of *structural constraints* in postcolonial art-music development by demonstrating how institutional, linguistic, and economic forces shape genre viability. Third, it conceptualises *indigenous-language opera* as a site of decolonial creativity, where local performance ecologies can generate new aesthetic forms. These contributions situate the study within global debates on musicology, language, and power, extending the work of scholars who argue for relational, historically grounded approaches to African musical modernity (Born, 2010; Agawu, 2003).

Practical and Cultural Implications

The findings carry significant implications for composers, educators, institutions, and communities. For composers, the study highlights the potential of indigenous dramaturgical strategies, cyclical narrative structures, participatory textures, and symbolic embodiment as foundations for new operatic works. For educators, the results underscore the need for curriculum reform that integrates indigenous-language training and performance ecologies into composition pedagogy (Nwamara, 2019). Institutions can draw on the findings to develop funding models and performance infrastructures that support large-scale indigenous-language works. For communities, the study affirms the value of participatory production models that reinforce cultural ownership and continuity. Collectively, these implications point toward a more inclusive and culturally grounded Nigerian art-music ecosystem.

LIMITATIONS

The study's limitations include gaps in archival documentation, geographic constraints, and the limited number of existing Igbo or quasi-operatic works available for analysis. These constraints reflect broader structural issues in Nigerian cultural archiving. Furthermore, while the study's



qualitative design limits broad generalizability, its methodological priority was interpretive depth regarding historical absence

Future Research Directions

Future research could empirically test the operatic models proposed by participants through pilot productions, collaborative workshops, or festival-based commissions. Longitudinal studies could examine how indigenous-language performance ecosystems evolve over time, while comparative research with Yoruba, Efik, or Kiswahili operatic traditions could illuminate cross-cultural patterns in African opera development. Digital archiving and ethnographic documentation of emerging works would further strengthen the historical record and support future scholarship.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the absence of Igbo-language opera is neither natural nor inevitable but the outcome of historical discontinuities and structural constraints that have shaped the Nigerian art-music landscape. By reconstructing the fragmented record of past attempts, analysing institutional and linguistic barriers, and identifying the aesthetic potential embedded in Igbo performance ecologies, the study reframes indigenous-language opera as a culturally viable and intellectually necessary project. Its findings contribute empirically by documenting a previously unexamined history, theoretically by advancing cultural absence as an analytic category, and practically by outlining feasible pathways for future operatic development. Ultimately, the study argues that creating Igbo-language opera is not merely an artistic endeavour but a cultural intervention that reimagines the relationship between language, identity, and musical modernity, opening new possibilities for Nigerian art-music futures and postcolonial musicological discourse.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. There are no financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the research design, data interpretation, or reporting of findings.



Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the researchers' home university. All procedures complied with international standards for research involving human participants.

Informed Consent

Written informed consent was obtained from all interview participants via Google Form. Participants were informed of the study's aims, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and data protection.

Data Availability

Due to the sensitive nature of interview data and the ethical requirement to protect participant confidentiality, raw transcripts cannot be publicly shared. Anonymised excerpts and non-identifiable archival metadata may be made available upon reasonable request to the authors, subject to ethical approval.

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, methodological design, data collection, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

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