

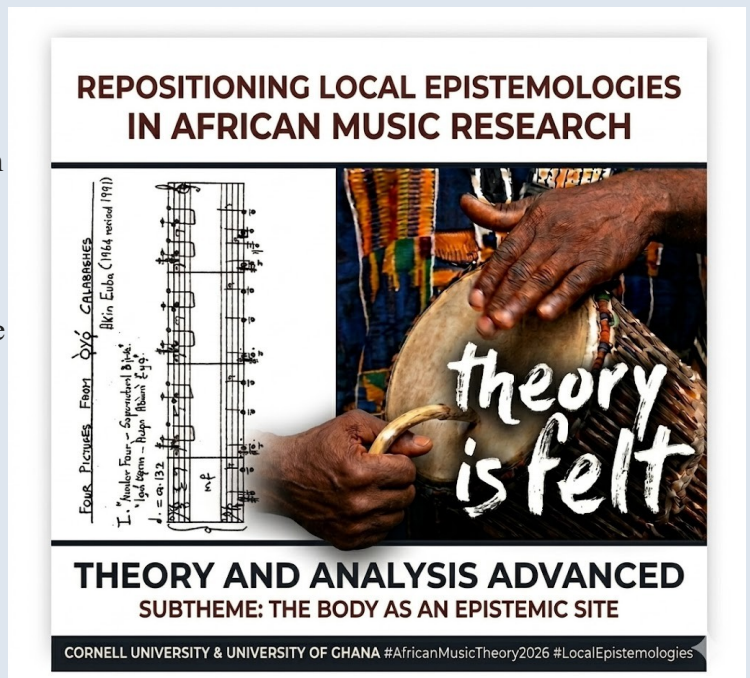
AAWM

Analytical Approaches to World Music
Special Topics Symposium 2026

REPOSITIONING LOCAL EPISTEMOLOGIES IN AFRICAN MUSIC RESEARCH: TOWARD ADVANCING THEORY AND ANALYSIS

Dates: **October 1-3, 2026** Mode of Participation: **Online**
Host Institutions: Cornell University & University of Ghana

The 1963 “Colloquium on Transcription and Analysis” (pub. 1964 as “Symposium on Transcription and Analysis: A Hukwe Song with Musical Bow,” *Ethnomusicology* 8, No. 3) remains one of the memorable ethnomusicological discourses centering on African musical practices. More significantly the philosophies, premises and objectives of such historic forum were framed, directly and indirectly through an intentional employment of the conjunction, “and”: Transcription and Analysis. Recent developments in scholarly exchanges and research initiatives focusing on traditions of African music, dance and related artistic expressions indicate several positive turns toward “African music as text.” (Agawu 2009, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2021, 2023) Even before Agawu’s elucidations and advocacies, Nketia had alluded to the importance of the “text” factor: “It may seem strange that ethnomusicologists now have to be reminded from time to time that the central subject of their discipline is music.” (Nketia 1981)



We have seen, in the last decade some progress in theorizations and formalizations of analytical approaches to African music, especially as evident in the contents of *Analytical Approaches to World Music*, and now also in the new Africa-focused *Analytical Approaches to African Music*. There is still much challenge—we need to more consciously but persuasively and plausibly allow local ontologies and epistemologies to pre-form our interpretive ideas, data, and the very premises of our research formulations. Regardless of some important distinctions and overlaps between autotheory and local epistemology there is a growing consensus that “the ontological turn can update and refine an ethnotheoretical approach, while maintaining its important goal of understanding culture from the inside” (Hood & Hutchinson 2020, reviewing Agawu 2009). There are also a few territories (ideological, geocultural, methodological, performance practices, African art music, etc.) that are yet to be adequately covered or realigned in our current research priorities and interpretive frames.

In this conference, we draw attention to the significant place of local or indigenous philosophical frameworks, foundational assumptions behind knowledge systems **and** how these systems are validated. The ultimate goal is to explore and realize not only decolonial agencies, but also the transformative self-

fulfilling acts of processes and products of theory and analysis in traditions of African music and dance. We therefore invite proposals from a range of scholars and practitioners working in the fields of African music and dance traditions to examine the following questions, the list which is not limited to:

- According Agawu (2023), “All music-making presupposes the existence of musical systems. Designed to orient rather than constrict music-making, such systems may be explicit and codified, or implicit and resident in the minds and memories of performers and their audiences.” What new tools and research strategies are appropriate for investigating and understanding mind and memory of performers and their audiences?
- If a researcher cannot dance the rhythm, is their transcription of it epistemologically valid?
- What happens to the “Theory of the Work” when a composition is intended to be infinitely variable?
- Can we theorize a “Musical Jurisprudence” where drum signals act as legal testimony?
- Is the *Mbira* a “telephone to the ancestors,” and if so, what are the technical “dialing codes” of its keys?
- Is an instrument a “repository of communal secrets” that should be protected from digital scanning?
- Can AI help us map the “migration of melodies” across the African Diaspora in ways human ears cannot?
- How does ritual trance change the performer’s perception of musical time and formal structure?
- Is the separation of “Music Department” and “Dance Department” in African universities an act of epistemic violence, especially in the holistic construction and experiential contexts of the arts?
- Does the “truth-value” of a historical epic diminish when it is transcribed into a Western-style textbook?
- How do local tuning systems reflect indigenous understandings of physics and acoustics?
- What is the significant place of timbre in African sound ecologies and epistemologies?

We conceive of the conference theme broadly; possible topics and subthemes include, but are not limited to:

Decolonizing Music Theory: Indigenous Analytical Frameworks

The Body as an Epistemic Site

Organological Ontologies: Instruments as Social Agents

Language, Orality, and Sounded Truth

Engaging AI as a Decolonizing Tool

Timbre as Epistemology

The “cognisant body” and Dance Pedagogy

“Sensiotics” and Multisensoriality

Afrobeats, Amapiano, and the Global Canon: indigenous theory and contemporary popular genres.

Intersectionality and Gendered Knowledge: Reclaiming the marginalized voices in sonic theory

The program will include four keynote speakers in addition to individual papers, special panel sessions, roundtable discussions, and working sessions. Program Committee invites proposals for individual papers, panels, and roundtables that will be peer-reviewed by the program committee. **Please submit an abstract of 250 words, accompanied by a short bio (100-150 words) to aaafmus.26@gmail.com by JULY 1, 2026. Notification of acceptance will be sent by August 1, 2026.** Selected papers will be published in the *Analytical Approaches to African Music* journal. Additional details will be posted at the www.iftawm.org website as they become available.

Keynote Speakers (contd below)

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Steven Friedson

(University of North Texas, USA)

Martin Scherzinger

(New York University, USA)

Damascus Kafumbe

(Middlebury College, USA)

Andile Khumalo

(University of Witwatersrand, SA)

ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

Daniel Avorgbedor (University of Ghana; perazimm@gmail.com)

Lawrence Shuster (Cornell University; lawshuster@gmail.com)

PROGRAM COMMITTEE

Adwoa Arhine (University of Ghana)

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