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CONDUCTING GESTURE AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION IN AFRICAN CHORAL MUSIC: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Abstract

This study reviews existing and emerging empirical and theoretical research on gesture and non-verbal communication in sub-Saharan African choral music. It applies a PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al., 2021) and synthesises 22 empirical and theoretical works published between 1992 and 2024, drawn from JSTOR, RILM Abstracts of Music Literature, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, African Journals Online, and Nigerian Journals Online. The aim is to map the prominent conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, and knowledge gaps. Four themes emerged with the analysis of current and future conceptual frameworks found in Marrin's (1996) expressive gesture and the digital baton, Ossaiga's (2020) newer concept of conducting dynamism, and the transcultural gesture perspective in East African choral scholarship. This thematic synthesis highlights: how Western-based gesture frameworks are not fully adequate for analysing African choral gesture; how kinesthesia/embodied movement serves as a key avenue of communication; how non-verbal actions related to performance contribute to the expressiveness of African choral gesture; and the lack of a cohesive model for analysing African choral gesture. A preliminary conceptual model of African choral gesture, the Communal Gesture Communication Model (CGCM), based on a hybrid of cultural-semiotic, kinesthetic-expressive, and participatory-communal perspectives was developed and proposed. The CGCM provides African Music scholars, Educators, and practitioners a culturally based heuristic. It is offered for future empirical verification, not a finished product.

Keywords: Conducting Gesture, Non-Verbal Communication, African Choral Music, Sub-Saharan Africa, Systematic Review, Communal Gesture Communication Model

Introduction

Choral conducting at its core is the transmission of the meaning of artistic intent. The conductor communicates the musical intention not only through the words they use but also through gesture, facial expression, and bodily posture. As Marrin (1996), Jansson et al. (2022), Durrant (2003) and Ford (2001) all highlight that musical gesture has been recognised as a non-verbal semiotic system that, through motion, encodes meanings of tempo, dynamics, affect and phrasing. Overtly, much has been studied about gesture within Western symphonic/choral practices, and significantly less about its role in African contexts.

African choral music uses systems of communication fundamentally distinct from the European art-music paradigm, a claim widely made within the discipline of African musicology (in varying conceptualisations). Nketia (1974) characterised the fundamental organisation of sub-Saharan African music as a function of communal practice and oral performance, in which cues to leadership are integral to the performance context rather than embedded in a system of external notation. Chernoff (1979) made similar observation from his work on Dagbamba drumming: the drummer, to take one example, is wholly dependent on supporting drummers, dancers, and the social interaction in the surrounding community; the communication, in other words, is participant and context-based, not based upon a broadcast of cues. Nzewi (1991) similarly identified African leadership by musicians as being situated within the discourse of the music itself, melodic-rhythmic flow, and bodily movement, rather than an abstract system of beat pattern.

This notion had since been located by Blacking (1973) within the realm of the body, in his argument that music is an aspect of humanly organised sound living in movement. Turino (2008) offers an important distinction between participant and presentational performance and positions much African music-making near the former, where the audience and performer merge as each shares equally, with contribution prioritised over the perfection of execution. Together, these observations lead to a single conclusion: African music is communicative, distributed, corporeal, and participatory, rather than centralised, notated, and unilateral.

Nevertheless, this claim must not be overemphasised; Agawu (2003) has warned against the tendency to conceptualise Africa as monolithic and points out that African choral music inevitably takes on foreign elements from Western culture, so that, at best, the comparison is

relative rather than absolute. The stance here will take a middle ground, accepting the participatory and embodied nature of communication in much African music, while also acknowledging local specificity and cultural dynamism. In most such traditions, therefore, gesture does not simply function via a signal-response process.

Blacking (1973) and Kubik (1999) have noted the direct transfer of musical knowledge through bodily movement; Nketia (1974) outlines how leadership and instruction is embedded within musical, vocal and dance interaction and not solely via isolated beat patterns.

Gesture thus correlates with four key modes of communication in much African music. One is dance, for which in many African musical traditions, a close integration of motion and sound occurs and where the drummer, typically, cues and answers the dancers within a performance interaction (Nketia, 1974; Nzewi, 1991; Chernoff, 1979). Another is vocal timbral inflexion, since in African languages tonality intertwines pitch and timbre in meaning (Agawu, 2016, 2003), and gesture aimed at influencing vocal colour directly impacts an element of meaning in the sound. Third, a call-and-response, antiphonal structure is common in many African musics.

Here, as a structural component, the direction of initiation and answer is widely distributed among the participating ensemble, and hence, the role of gesture is primarily that of cues for the initiating and responding elements, not simply tracking a fixed time frame (Kubik, 1999; Nketia, 1974; Agawu, 2016).

Fourth is dispersed music leadership, in which directional control is situated within the ensemble more broadly, with interaction and responsiveness flowing back and forth between a lead musician and participants (Chernoff, 1979; Nzewi, 1991; Turino, 2008). Studies of conductorship in Nigeria (Odusanya, 2024; Oladele, 2023; Odusanya & Idolor, 2023; Ogunlade, 2014), Kenya (Wafula, 2023), and South Africa (Erlmann, 1996), illustrate that African conductors often draw upon gesture lexicons shaped by the musical traditions with which they work and that are somewhat different to the Western norm of stick-based gesture. While scholarly discourse on Africanist conductors and their gestures is increasingly active, there is no synthesised analysis available of the study of gesture in African choral musics, nor an outline of current research areas and trends.

This is problematic for educators and scholars of African choral music because it results in a lack of effective pedagogical guidance for teaching non-verbal gestures in an appropriate and

culturally sensitive manner and, at the research level, no clear framework for contextualising current work and delineating areas for future exploration.

This study addresses these gaps. By systematically analysing peer-reviewed literature and selected grey literature, it synthesises available scholarship on gesture in the African choral domain, maps methodological strengths and weaknesses, and proposes a preliminary framework for ensemble performance across sub-Saharan Africa that remains adaptable to intra-regional variation: the Communal Gesture Communication Model (CGCM).

Research Questions

This review addresses four questions.

1. What conceptual frameworks have scholars applied to the study of conducting gesture and non-verbal communication in African choral music?
2. What methodological approaches characterise the existing literature?
3. What themes emerge from a synthesis of findings across studies?
4. What analytical model, if any, adequately accounts for non-verbal communication in African choral practice?

Scope and Significance

This study fills three gaps. First, it contributes to the theoretical foundations of ethnomusicology and African choral conducting research. Second, it provides music educators with evidence for the design of conservatory and university curricula in Africa. Third, it presents a theoretically grounded and culturally conscious framework that practising conductors in sub-Saharan Africa can use to conduct ensembles. The study also situates a research field with deeper roots than its recent output suggests. Formal scholarship on African choral conducting and art music extends back several decades, from Ekwueme's foundational texts on choir training and choral conducting for Africans and on the theory of African music (Ekwueme, 1973, 1993, 2004), through analyses of Nigerian art music and its indigenous sources (Euba, 2001; Omojola, 1995), to comparative work on the use of indigenous genres in choral art music elsewhere on the continent (Dor, 2005). Recent contributions continue this line, including studies of the relationship between indigenous Nigerian music practices and formal choral practice (Odusanya, 2025; Odusanya & Layade, 2025). This review consolidates and extends that body of work.

Conceptual Lenses

The study utilises three conceptual frames as the conceptual basis of analysis, and each frame offers a different facet to the study of gesture in the context of choral rehearsal and learning; there is not a ready and proven ‘theory’ in the mainstream literature concerning conducting studies, therefore, three “emerging frameworks are employed in the capacity as ‘theories’. In order to fulfil the criteria for a ‘review’, each framework is examined prior to being used on four parameters: i) reason for its utilisation; ii) acceptance in the broader research community; iii) either established or emerging; iv) main limitations. A comparative summary of this assessment of the lenses is displayed in Table 2, while Figure 2 illustrates how each of these lenses focuses on the ‘new’ theoretical framework presented here.

Marrin's Approach to Expressive Gesture

Marrin's (1996) master's thesis on expressive gesture and the digital baton provides the analytical starting point for this study. Marrin argued that motion generates gesture and that gesture encodes musical meaning in ways that sensors can detect and decode, making gesture the primary medium through which a conductor expresses interpretive intent. The justification for using this lens is that it isolates the meaning-bearing function of gesture with unusual precision, and that function is the one African choral conducting most clearly shares with other traditions. Its scholarly reception is uneven. The digital-baton work, developed at the MIT Media Lab, is recognised within computer-music and gesture-interface research, but it has not been taken up as a theory of choral communication and is rarely cited in choral conducting scholarship. It is therefore best regarded as an emerging lens for choral study rather than an established one. Studies that apply Marrin's ideas in Africa, such as Odusanya (2024) on church-based conductors in Ogbomoso, Nigeria, report that African conductors construct meaning through gesture and that African choristers perceive and respond to that gesture in real time. The shortcomings are numerous and critical. Marrin's taxonomy was developed in conjunction with an electronic sound instrument in the West and tested within a performance context; it has not been tested as a general description of choral communication, nor does it include the shared/participant and oral/transmission components of sub-Saharan choral leading.

Ossaiga's Account of Conducting Dynamism

Developing and Applying “Conducting Dynamism” Conducting is seen to be ‘dynamic’ as opposed to ‘static’ and changes from culture to culture, context to context, in terms of musical

repertoire and of the individual conductor. So a ‘performance’ is understood, in this view, to be an act of negotiation with specific resources within a context. This conducting dynamism has been theorised by Ossaiga (2020) as part of a doctoral study of the choral practice of formally trained conductors in Southern Nigeria.

In a context of, for example, conducting practice where conductors may have had Western classical training, they engage with aspects of polyrhythmic performance traditions, tonal-inflexion cues in addition to tone language, and participatory practices of physical movement.

This new concept has the advantage of having being born in Africa of African performing cultures, which ensures it has direct purchase on this current research. The impact of the theory is both recent and not widespread, being further adapted by its originator in application to gospel music conducting (2024) and African art-music conduction in Southern Nigeria (2026), and has attracted a small body of subsequent use in a localised academic community (e.g. Odusanya 2024; 2025, Odusanya & Idolor, 2023), but not yet to date beyond this. This research acknowledges the concept originated with Ossaiga (2020) and views it as an emerging lens to be used for interpretation, not predictive assertion, in the application of the data collected within this study.

The Transcultural Gesture Perspective

The third lens is derived inductively from Wafula's (2023) analysis of conducting gestural practice in the Kenya Music Festival and related scholarship, and it offers an inductively generated perspective on African art music conducting. Here, gestures in the conductor role in this performance style are understood to occupy a ‘negotiating position’ in the space between traditional Western art-music practice and indigenous styles and ways of knowing. In this approach, the gesture is that of an acting position that functions in the ‘hybrid space of contemporary African post-colonial music performance’, rather than one that transmits predefined signals. From a three-way distinction in Kenyan practice that Wafula (2023) describes, namely Western mimicry, a turn toward indigenous gesture, and a synthesis producing a context-specific gestural language, the perspective concludes that no single gestural model can claim authority over African choral art music, and that analytical models should treat transcultural negotiation as a structural feature. The justification for using this lens is that it situates conducting in its post-colonial history, its reception is emerging within East African choral scholarship, and its principal limitation is that it describes the contested setting without supplying an analytic procedure for studying gesture within it.

These three lenses are complementary rather than rival. Marrin's approach concerns the interpretation of gesture within musical codes. Ossaiga's account addresses the adaptive and responsive nature of the conductor's role. The transcultural perspective addresses the socio-historical context of African choral gesture. Because two of the three are emerging and untested, the study does not lean on any one of them as an authority. It instead draws the complementary insight from each and integrates the three into the framework proposed later, the CGCM, which is itself offered for testing rather than asserted as settled.

Table 2

Critical Appraisal of the Three Conceptual Lenses

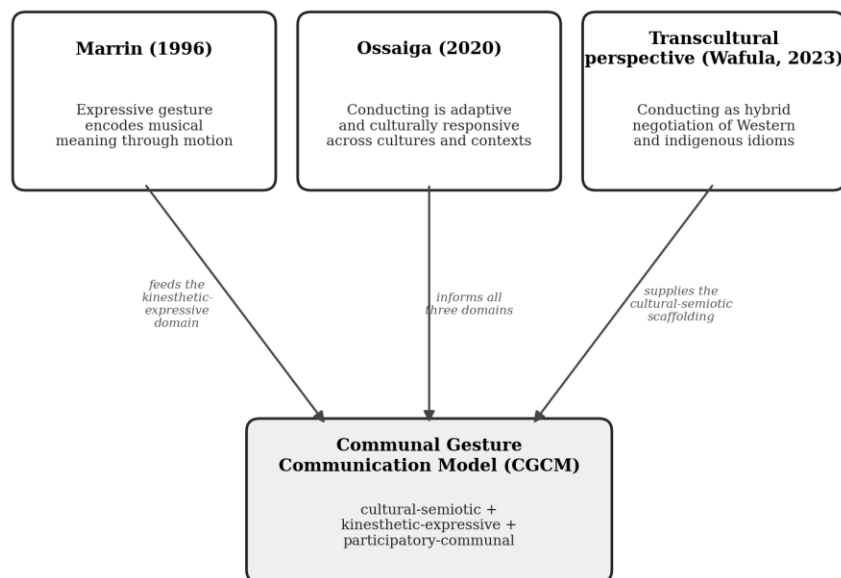
	Marrin (1996)	Ossaiga (2020)	Transcultural (Wafula, 2023)
Core idea	Gesture encodes musical meaning detectable through motion	Conducting varies dynamically with culture, context, composition, and conductor	Conducting is a hybrid negotiation of Western and indigenous idioms
Justification for use	Isolates the meaning-bearing function of gesture	Derived from African conducting practice itself	Captures the post-colonial, contested setting of practice
Scholarly reception	Known in computer-music and gesture-interface work, not in choral scholarship	Developed across Ossaiga (2020, 2024, 2026); adopted by a few Nigerian studies; not yet widely cited	Emerging within East African choral scholarship
Status	Emerging for choral study	Emerging	Emerging

	Marrin (1996)	Ossaiga (2020)	Transcultural (Wafula, 2023)
Key limitation	Western, technological origin; ignores communal and oral dimensions	Untested beyond a small body of work	Descriptive; offers no analytic procedure
Contribution to the CGCM	Kinesthetic-expressive domain	All three domains	Cultural-semiotic scaffolding

Note. Two of the three lenses are emerging and not yet widely tested. The study uses them to interpret evidence rather than as established authorities.

Figure 2

Convergence of the Three Conceptual Lenses on the CGCM



Note. Each lens contributes a distinct insight that the Communal Gesture Communication Model integrates. The figure is a conceptual schematic, not a claim of empirical validation.

Method

We followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guideline (Page et al., 2021), suitably modified to account for qualitative and theoretical literature within the music field. PRISMA is applicable to disciplines in the humanities and social sciences seeking a transparent synthesis of evidence rather than a quantitative meta-analysis (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). We frame this work as a systematic literature review aiming to build a theoretical framework, with review capturing the identification, screening, appraisal and synthesis of a specific body of literature against stated criteria, and systematic signifying the documented and repeatable search, screen and appraisal processes.

Search Strategy A systematic literature search was conducted for relevant resources available on six academic databases/platforms: JSTOR, RILM Abstracts of Music Literature, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, African Journals Online and Nigerian Journals Online.

This search took place between 6 January and 28 February 2024 and was supplemented by a final search verification on 15 March 2024. We combined search terms (using Boolean operators): 'conducting gesture' and 'African choral music', 'non-verbal communication' and 'choral conducting', 'choral directing' and 'sub-Saharan Africa', 'gesture' and 'ensemble' and 'Nigeria' or 'Ghana' or 'Kenya' or 'South Africa', 'Marrin gesture musical communication', 'indigenous conducting' and 'Africa', 'isicathamiya' and 'performance' and 'gesture'. Only those papers published between 1992 and 2024 (inclusive) were retained, underpinned by Marrin's (1996) foundational publication on the topic. No language restriction was imposed, though all documents returned were in English. Grey literature, including unpublished master's and doctoral research from sub-Saharan African institutions such as the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, was included where the study addressed the review topic.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study included documents that met all of the following conditions. (a) The document addressed conducting gesture or non-verbal communication in choral or ensemble practice. (b) The document presented empirical data, conceptual analysis, or substantial commentary on African musical traditions and contexts. (c) The document focused on sub-Saharan Africa. (d) The document appeared as a refereed journal article, book chapter, thesis, dissertation, or recognised

conference proceeding. The study excluded documents limited to Western orchestral or choral contexts, documents on African music that did not analyse gestural or non-verbal communication, and documents that introduced the subject without an analytic component.

Quality Appraisal

The study appraised every included document with a structured, four-criterion instrument adapted from the quality-appraisal logic of Thomas and Harden (2008) and the appraisal principles set out in PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). Each study was scored on four criteria: clarity of the research question or conceptual aim, soundness of the evidence base or data, centrality of gesture or non-verbal communication as the object of investigation, and specificity to African choral or ensemble practice. Each criterion was rated on a three-point scale, where 0 indicated absent, 1 indicated partial, and 2 indicated strong, producing a possible score of 0 to 8 for each study. The study did not exclude any document on the basis of its appraisal score, because the corpus is small and several lower-scoring grey literature sources carry contextual value that the published corpus does not. Instead, appraisal scores were used to weight each study's contribution to the synthesis, so that higher-scoring studies carried greater interpretive weight and lower-scoring studies were reported with explicit caution. This procedure addresses the role of study quality in interpretation without discarding scarce regional evidence.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

A coding method was used to identify thematic categories for data extraction. Each article was read in full and coded with regard to conceptual perspective, methodology, setting and location, the main results for gestural or non-verbal communication, and classroom implications. The coded themes were pooled, compared, and synthesised across studies (similar to Thomas and Harden 2008). This dual inductive and deductive process interacted with the three conceptual lenses outlined above. The comparison of studies was richer than a simple summation by drawing out areas of agreement, contradictions, and comparisons of both methods and conceptualisations

across studies. The findings are presented using this comparative process, rather than one study after another.

PRISMA Flow

Table 1

PRISMA Flow of Study Selection

Stage	n
Records identified through database searches	214
Records remaining after duplicates removed	171
Records screened by title and abstract	171
Records excluded at the screening stage	128
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	43
Articles excluded at full-text stage	21
Studies included in the final synthesis	22

Note. Database sources were JSTOR, RILM Abstracts of Music Literature, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, African Journals Online, and Nigerian Journals Online. Studies excluded at the full-text stage were off-topic, lacked an African focus, or were non-empirical without a conceptual contribution.

Table 1 presents the study-selection flow for this review.

Findings and Synthesis

The 22 included studies yield four themes. The study interprets each theme through the three conceptual frameworks and, for each theme, reports where the studies agree, where they contradict one another, and how they differ in method and concept. Before the themes, the corpus answers the second research question about the methodological character of the existing literature. The literature is overwhelmingly qualitative. Studies rely on participant observation, case study, practitioner reflection, interview, and document analysis, and several combine these within a single design. The Nigerian studies draw on church-based and university choral settings (Odusanya,

2024; Odusanya & Idolor, 2023; Ogunlade, 2014), the Kenyan study draws on festival adjudication and audience perception (Wafula, 2023), and the South African material draws on ethnographic fieldwork (Erlmann, 1996). No study in the corpus uses an experimental or quasi-experimental design, and none reports quantitative measurement of gesture or its effects. This qualitative and observational character gives the literature descriptive richness and cultural grounding, but it also limits causal inference and cross-context generalisation, a constraint taken up in Theme 4 and in the directions for future research.

Theme 1: Inadequacy of Western Gesture Paradigms in African Choral Contexts

The most frequent finding across the corpus is that Western baton technique and its associated gestural vocabulary do not provide a sufficient basis for conducting African choral music. Ekwueme (1993), in the earliest dedicated manual of choral conducting for Africans, anticipated this finding by insisting that choir training in African contexts must adapt Western technique to indigenous vocal production, language, and rhythm rather than transplant it wholesale. This inadequacy has semiotic and expressive dimensions.

Western conducting semiotics presume a codified language shared by Western-trained musicians. Specific gestures such as the downbeat, sub-beat markers, dynamic width, and left-hand independence presume mastery of staff notation, metered rhythm, and a rehearsal culture built on score analysis. Many African choral traditions, whether viewed as oral practice or as developed art-choir practice, rest on different epistemologies of performance (Agawu, 2003; Nketia, 1974). A leader of a Chopi ensemble, who is simultaneously composer, conductor, and performer, signals structural features through cues in the singing and through dance and gesture inseparable from the performance itself, rather than through a distinct conducting vocabulary (Agawu, 2003).

On the expressive dimension, Nigerian church-based practice shows that effective leadership of African performance demands gestures beyond Western pedagogy. Odusanya (2024) reports that the conductor's signalling, facial expressions, body language, and spatial orientation before the performance are central to engaging performers. Odusanya and Idolor (2023) show that conducting in African art music integrates directing with vocal arrangement and styling. Wafula (2023) in Kenya finds an analogous result: conductors who applied Western gestures were perceived by performers and adjudicators as out of cultural sync, and top-ranked conductors in the 2017 Kenya Music Festival employed full-body gesture, dance movement, vocal cues and physical

signs of dynamic contrast unknown in the Western idiom and recognisable as indigenous. Across the studies the central claim is not at issue, though approaches diverge. The Nigerian and Kenyan works share the central claim about Western practice undermining that of Africa and each has distinct method and conceptual undergirding.

The Nigerian approach has its genesis in observation and self-reported knowledge from church-based practice (Odusanya, 2024; Odusanya & Idolor, 2023), while the Kenyan work is informed by festival adjudication and audience perception (Wafula, 2023); Agawu (2003) considers the problem epistemological, while Odusanya (2025) addresses it as technical, repairable by practice itself.

Again, there is no conflict among texts here, but there is a relative concentration on qualitatively based evidence from a limited selection of national contexts, which reduces its scope and generalisability. Odusanya (2025) develops this idea into an analysis of Western Apala and Juju practices, concluding that African conducting practice severed from the broader context of the music itself sacrifices expressive potency and culturally meaningful communication.

Theme 2: Kinesthesia and Embodied Movement as Communicative Modalities

Another significant trend is the overwhelming prominence of kinesthesia and embodied movement as the main means of communication in African choral directing. The Western teaching approach seems to consider the body as an efficient delivery system for pre-written information, whereas African studies treat it as the main body through which music can be communicated. The approach fits within the embodied theories of music Cognition (Leman, 2008) and Gesture (McNeill, 1992), which see gestures as an integral part of the thinking process. They are, in this regard, also in harmony with Blacking's theory (1973) on music being "humanly organised sound living in humanly organised bodies". The Kenyan study by Wafula (2023) corroborates these findings, while the Nigerian studies by Odusanya (2024) and Odusanya and Idolor (2023) document specific movements used, such as whole-body contour, gestural shaping of the voice, and the embodiment of rhythms, and compare them. What seems to differ is the specific emphasis on whether gesture is important as part of the musical knowledge or it plays a significant role in communicating authenticity. All these studies emphasise the importance of kinesthetic competence over the use of a typical gestural vocabulary. A major weakness of these studies is

their lack of empirical grounding, making it impossible to determine how much each gesture contributed to overall performance quality.

Third theme: How non-verbal cues affect ensemble performance quality

The last, but not least, theme addresses the association between performing actions (and, by extension, their impact) and the perceived musicality of African choirs. Although African studies have, for the most part, relied on observational, qualitative evidence, the agreement on the link between gesture and outcome can be noted as striking. As the above mentioned Nigerian scholars (Odusanya, 2024; Odusanya & Idolor, 2023) suggest that the use of the rich array of gestures together with a facial expression, contorted whole body-moves along with well defined hand patterns, have resulted in more expressive renderings of a given musical piece and that such conductors have come to be characterized as ‘communicating conductors’ having integrated gestures and words into one single manner of conducting.

On the contrary, an ensemble conducted solely with words and gestures, mostly time-keeping during the concert, has consistently yielded significantly less expressive and varied results. Using comparable qualitative data on performances at the Kenya Music Festival, Wafula (2023) found that the most successful pieces were those conducted with the most animated gestures, where dynamic contours matched the dynamic nuances and rhythms. The consistency of these findings in varied settings is indeed a strong sign of a pattern, though, as is the case in most cases when studying music conducting in real practice environments, no attempt was made to control for extraneous variables like the level of piece difficulty or even the time allocated to the rehearsal session of each piece.

Besides the fact that there is reciprocal communication with a highly permeable boundary between conductors and ensembles in African contexts, as is also noted by Turino (2008)-it is worth noting that where conductors encourage choristers to mimic their gestures, rhythmic and dynamic patterns and in turn to respond quickly to these cues, the quality of both rhythm and dynamics increases. With regard to this issue, whereas studies of the western orchestra indicate a strong causal relation between gestures, on the one hand, and expressive impact of performances on the audience, on the other (Nopoles, 2013; Nopoles & Silvey, 2017), no such empirical studies were carried out on African choristers. This contradiction can be traced to the methodological approaches employed in the two domains, with African studies drawing on field-work-based

observational methods, and Western research utilising controlled empirical design(s), which makes their findings somewhat different, although the logic behind both appears sound.

Theme 4: Absence of a Unified Analytical Framework for African Choral Gesture

The final theme is methodological and conceptual. No unified framework adequately analyses non-verbal conducting in African choral music, for three reasons. First, the evidence is geographically and culturally narrow. Most studies come from Nigeria, with a few from Kenya and South Africa, and none from West African Francophone contexts, Central Africa, or the East African Great Lakes region. The distributed communication system of the Aka polyphonic tradition in Central Africa, for example, differs sharply from the hierarchical models studied in Nigeria and Kenya. Second, the studies are uniformly qualitative and participatory-observational, and none test causal claims about gesture and expressive outcome through experimental or quasi-experimental design, which limits generalisation across ensembles and traditions. Third, none of the studies proposes a framework that captures the cultural-semiotic, kinesthetic, and interactive dimensions of African choral gesture together. Researchers instead read African data through borrowed models, which produces a literature that is richly descriptive yet conceptually underdeveloped.

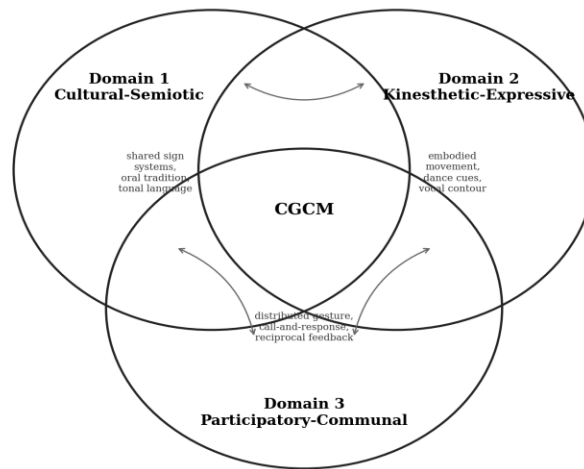
The Communal Gesture Communication Model (CGCM)

On the basis of these themes, this study proposes a preliminary conceptual framework, the Communal Gesture Communication Model (CGCM), for analysing non-verbal conducting in sub-Saharan African choral music. The CGCM emerges from thematic synthesis rather than from primary data, so the study presents it as a preliminary framework and heuristic rather than as a definitive or fully validated analytical model. It is offered for testing and refinement through future empirical work and intended to remain adaptable to regional and genre-specific performance practices.

The CGCM conceptualises gestural communication in African choirs through three interacting domains, none of which operates in isolation. Figure 1 presents the model.

Figure 1

The Communal Gesture Communication Model (CGCM)



The three domains overlap and feed back into one another. The double-headed arrows represent mutual influence among the cultural-semiotic, kinesthetic-expressive, and participatory-communal domains during performance.

Domain 1: Cultural-Semiotic

This domain concerns the function of gesture within the meaning-making and sign systems of a culture. Building on Marrin (1996), who treats gestural movement as encoding musical meaning, the CGCM extends the idea to cultural interpretation and holds that the meaningfulness of gesture depends on shared understanding among performers about particular signs and their intended meanings. Within African choral traditions, this common ground is shared via oral traditions, indigenous language tone and conventions for genre-specific performances (Nketia, 1974). The sphere encompasses, as well, a transcultural gesture: [Conducting in postcolonial Africa is a syncretic practice; Western classical and indigenous African modes get to negotiate, etc. As part of practices such as the Kenya Music Festival and Nigerian art-choral traditions. This conflict is an opportunity, not a problem.

Domain 2: Kinesthetic-Expressive

The conduct as movement: CGCM The domain under consideration relates to the embodied, movement dimensions of gesture conduction. CGCM draws upon the African performance dictum that the body is central for musical meaning-making and performative power (Blacking, 1973; Leman, 2008). The conduct is driven by the conductor's full-body movement

contours, dance movement leading, and body gestures reflecting vocal shape and embodied rhythmic contours, to engender kinesthetic knowledge of African choral directing.

Ossaiga's description of conductive dynamics (2020) reflects the responsive, culturally patterned nature of conducting-lead body motion, a claim substantiated by practical cases from Odusanya (2025) and Odusanya and Idolor (2023). In this domain, performance evaluation, among other criteria, hinges on the socio-culturally impactful quality of the kinesthetic conducting approach rather than on the accuracy of standard commands.

Domain 3: Participatory-Communal

This domain addresses what Western conducting models tend to omit: distributed and participatory gesture. African choral performance is often organised through gesture that is not solely conductor-to-ensemble but reciprocal, circulating among ensemble members and back to the conductor (Turino, 2008). Call-and-response offers a useful model. As in verbal call-and-response, the conductor's gesture prompts a response from the choir, and the choir's movement informs the conductor's subsequent gesture, so that the musical outcome arises from the interplay between them. Conductors trained in this framework learn not only to deploy a personal gestural vocabulary but also to read and respond to the gestural signals circulating within the ensemble.

Application of the CGCM

The CGCM operates at three levels of practice: analytical, pedagogical, and evaluative.

At the analytical level, researchers use the three domains as coding categories for observing and interpreting gesture in African choral contexts. The cultural-semiotic domain asks which semiotic conventions guide the interpretation of gesture in a given context and genre. The kinesthetic-expressive domain asks which movement behaviours form the conductor's primary vocabulary. The participatory-communal domain asks how gesture circulates among the performing community and which feedback mechanisms shape the conductor's gesture in real time.

At the pedagogical level, the CGCM supports curriculum design in African music institutions. An undergraduate or graduate programme would include training in cultural-semiotic literacy across sub-Saharan traditions, skill development in kinesthetic expressivity grounded in indigenous movement, and performing-community work focused on reciprocal participation between the conductor and the choir. This addresses the consistent call in the sampled literature to include indigenous performing traditions in the practice of Western Conduct training (Durrant,

2003; Odusanya, 2025; Wafula, 2023). At the evaluative level, CGCM serves as an analytical tool for evaluating the choir's performance and the conductor's competency in African festivals and competitive arenas. Assessors conversant with CGCM would apply the criteria of cultural-semiotic adequacy of gesture; quality kinesthetics of the gesture/ expression; effectiveness of participatory gesture in the context of ensemble to determine effectiveness of the performance.

Relationship to the Three Conceptual Lenses

Far from superseding them, the CGCM incorporates and builds upon these three conceptual lenses, mindful that two of them are new and untested. The kinematic-expressive realm carries Marrin's (1996) view of gesture as musical intention expressed in motion. Ossaiga's (2020) vision of leadership as adaptive and socially and culturally grounded is dispersed across the three lenses. The transcultural lens (Wafula, 2023) provides a historically and culturally situated base from which to anchor the CGCM in the post-colonial African Choral performance.

The CGCM can thus be said to build upon and innovate previous studies in 3 areas: it is multi-domain; it offers alternatives to purely kinematic or purely culturally interpretive lenses, and it places participative communal dynamics at the centre of the study of choral conduction. Given that the studies by Marrin and Ossaiga represent nascent theoretical attempts, they will be presented here as a fusion of promising but not conclusive approaches and, as such, will be offered for empirical testing rather than a definitive comparison with any model in the field.

Theoretical Implications.

The CGCM adds to an ever-growing body of research which seeks to decentralise Western notions of musical communication and cross-cultural studies of music-making. This can clearly be seen through the elegance of the African conductors' gestures and the success of their communication through movement, once divorced from Western-centric benchmarks. The participatory-communal domain of the CGCM carries implications for choral gesture research beyond Africa, building on Jansson et al. (2022), who observe that gesture is both emblematic and auxiliary, and extending that observation toward a view of gesture as distributed rather than solely

leader-generated. This view applies to any conducting practice that treats performance as a mutually responsive activity among members of the performing community.

Pedagogical Implications

The reviewed studies offer concrete directions for conducting pedagogy in African music institutions. Programmes in sub-Saharan universities should adopt indigenous African performance traditions as a core component of undergraduate and graduate curricula. Score reading alone is insufficient for competence in African choral performance, and students need kinesthetic training grounded in the traditions and contexts in which they will lead. A CGCM-based curriculum would contain units on cultural-semiotic literacy within major sub-Saharan traditions, kinesthetic conducting training drawn from Yoruba, Zulu, and East African movement traditions, and performing-community practicums focused on cultivating reciprocal gestural communication. The CGCM thus offers a model for curricula that embody the need for grounded cultural learning expressed across several studies (Durrant, 2003; Odusanya, 2024; Wafula, 2023).

Directions for Future Research

Three priorities follow from this synthesis. First, geographically diverse empirical studies are needed in West African Francophone areas, Central Africa, and the East African Great Lakes region, because variation across these contexts is likely and generalisation drawn from the Nigerian and Kenyan evidence in this review may be unsound. Second, mixed-methods and experimental research is needed to draw causal conclusions about specific non-verbal behaviours and outcomes in African choral ensembles, on the model of Nápoles (2013) and Nápoles and Silvey (2017) but designed for African performing communities. Third, technology-assisted research on performing gestures, following Marrin's (1996) methodological lead, offers an underused approach to African conducting. Applying motion capture or sensor technology to African conducting would yield quantitative data for comparison, document distinctive traditional gestures, and help build an archive of practice during a period of intense globalisation and cultural change.

Conclusion

This review set out to answer four questions, and the synthesis addresses each in turn. On the first question, scholars have applied three emerging conceptual frameworks rather than a single established theory: Marrin's (1996) account of expressive gesture, Ossaiga's (2020) account of

conducting dynamism, and the transcultural gesture perspective drawn from Wafula (2023). On the second question, the existing literature is overwhelmingly qualitative and observational, strong in cultural description but without experimental or quantitative designs. On the third question four themes emerge: limitations of the western concept of gesture; significance of kinesthetic and embodied movement; connections between non-verbal communication and expressive results; lack of unifying model for analysing African choral practice.

For the fourth question given that no extant model comprehensively represents African choral non-verbal expression, an original, ethnomusicological approach termed the Communal Gesture Communication Model (CGCM), is advanced. It is based on the integration of cultural-semiotic, kinesthetic-expressive, and participatory-communal spheres and presented not as a definitive model but a heuristic tool that could frame future analysis, teaching, or assessment as well as inspire an empirical hypothesis. CGCM's viability will depend on the geographically diverse, multiple-method, and computationally enhanced research that should, according to many experts, dominate the field.

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