**Afrobeats, Identity, and Globalization: The Intersection of Nigerian Music and Global Popular Culture**

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**Abstract**

The Nigerian music industry has become a global brand, growing steadily from its days of humble beginnings to an internationally recognized entertainment industry. It has incorporated several other aspects of popular culture such as dance, and can be called the main anchor of contemporary Nigerian Gen-Z youth culture. This study explores the dynamic intersection of contemporary Nigerian music, specifically Afrobeats, and global popular culture, examining how globalization processes shape cultural identity and musical expression. Using qualitative research that incorporates exploratory and descriptive research design approaches that includes literature review and content analysis, this study explores the cultural ramifications of Afrobeats' transnational distribution as well as the strategies Nigerian musicians employ to succeed in international music marketplaces. The results show that Afrobeats redefine African identity while challenging mainstream Western music narratives as a place of cultural resistance, hybridity, and self-expression. This study sheds light on the complexity of Afrobeats' worldwide ascent and advances our understanding of how globalization affects cultural creation, consumption, and identity formation. In the end, it is argued that popular musicians have been successful in globalizing the Nigerian Afrobeats genre by fusing different traditional and foreign dances with modern sounds, ingeniously reinterpreting modern music, and developing new identities for popular culture.

**Keywords: Afrobeats, globalization, cultural identity, Nigerian music, popular culture, transnationalism.**

# Preamble

The Nigerian music industry is a vibrant and quickly expanding subset of Nigeria's entertainment sector. It is known for its diverse genres, popular artistes and cultural influences. Afrobeats, Afropop, Highlife, Fuji, Gospel music, and a number of other traditional and folk genres are among the well-liked genres. With an estimated income of over $2 billion, the Nigerian music industry is arguably both the biggest in Africa and among the richest in the world. Also, Nigeria is the second-biggest market for music consumption on YouTube behind the US, per the company's Music Insights Report (Abimbola, 2024).

The rapidly expanding Nigerian population is one of the many reasons for this accomplishment. Nigeria is home to an astounding 200 million people, a fact that is essential to the music's acceptability and broad distribution. Since Nigeria's music business is big enough to support and guarantee the financial success of most artistic ventures, the majority of popular musicians tailor their music to the demands of their own country (Adedeji, 2016). This group supports Nigerian musical output abroad through a sizable diaspora in addition to offering a sizable home market (Voxlyrics, 2024).

Of a truth, without globalization and the formation of popular culture, Nigeria's demographics mean very little to her popular music industry (Ibe, 2019, pp. 186-187). Popular culture encompasses everything from everyday activities that are not regarded as high culture to language, food, fashion, and daily routines. It is a consumerist culture motivated by money (Kolo & Yağbasan, 2020). Nigerian musicians have been able to capitalize on this in the digital era to globalize Nigerian music and culture. Film/cinema and music, above all, are perhaps the biggest global generators of popular culture. The global reputation of Nigerian contemporary music is increasing due to the popularity of social media platforms such as Youtube, Tiktok, Instagram, and music streaming services like Sportify, Audiomack, Apple Music, among others.

Nigerian music has a rich history that includes several ethnic groups, each supplying distinctive instruments and sounds. For instance, the Yorubas invented the Apala and Juju styles.

Juju is a popular music genre that was first popularized in Ibadan and developed in Lagos in the 1920s (Adedeji, 2010). It is based on traditional Yoruba percussion. The genre saw great popularity both domestically and abroad, thanks to performers like Ebenezer Obey and King Sunny Ade. The most well-known figure in this genre, King Sunny Ade, played at major international events and went on to plan extravagant world music tours, which helped to establish Nigeria as a major player in the music industry. His record label also became one of the most talked-about worldwide recording deals for a Nigerian artist (Osika & Aromiro, 2022).

Omibiyi-Obidike defines highlife as “a fusion of African recreational music and foreign musical styles derived from regimental brass band music, sea shantis and Christian melodies” (2012, p. 188). He further posits that the prototype highlife featured in the coastal states of West Africa such as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Gambia and Ghana all had their distinct structure, content and styles, such that one could recognize each variant such as Ghanaian highlife, Sierra Leonean highlife, etc. Ghanaian *Highlife* gained traction in the eastern part of

Nigeria in the early 1950s. “Highlife music, like many of our current popular music genres such as Afrobeat, reggae, rhythm and blues, Afro hip hop or rap music, was unashamedly eclectic. It borrowed musical instrumentations, dance styles, melodies, and so on, from all over the world” (Shaka, 2012, p. 82). Christian hymns, regimental band music, and traditional African dance music came together to form highlife music (Igbi, 2015). By the 1960s, a number of Nigerian Highlife bands had already gained popularity in the country's music scene. Notable among them were Bobby Benson's Highlife and Rex Jim Lawson's Highlife band, the latter, a popular guitar Highlife band which sprang up from palm-wine music and was a major promoter of this style.

The 1970s and 80s also saw major successes in Highlife music nationally, with famed artistes like Sonny Okosun, Osita Osadebe, and Nico Mbarga whose popular track “Sweet Mother” became a foremost hit in Nigeria and Africa with 13 million copies sold (Igbi, 2015).

A new genre called *Afrobeats* has become popular all over the world since the past decade. Afrobeats is recognized for fusing contemporary musical genres including hip-hop, reggae, and electronic music with traditional African music. It is widely accepted that Fela Kuti was the forerunner of this current trend in Nigerian pop music. His music style known as “Afrobeat,” which gave rise to the term "Afrobeats" in the first place, is performed in Nigerian pidgin and contains subtle Yoruba overtones. It is rooted in African rhythm and percussion with influences from western jazz (Adedeji, 2010). Fela’s Afrobeat has a five-beat drum pattern and a double kick; and was previously known as Highlife jazz before it was called Afrobeat (Shoniya, 2022). Afrobeat was very popular, most especially because it championed activism, and was often used to criticize unpopular government policies, corrupt practices and social injustice in

Nigeria. Fela’s music was not only revolutionary and pervasive, but transcended the boundaries of what had ever emerged from Nigeria in the past, setting a new standard for creativity and innovation. It redefined the musical landscape, leaving an indelible mark on both the local and international stage. Today it is celebrated as perhaps the most legendary sound across the entire African continent, inspiring generations of artistes and influencing the identity of modern West African music.

Even the globally recognized Afrobeats with the ‘s’ pays homage to Fela, not only through the adoption of the Afrobeat name but also by frequently sampling his style (Ilesanmi, 2024). Burna Boy, one of Fela’s biggest admirers, and whose mother was a prominent member of Fela’s band, is arguably the current Afrobeats artiste who samples Fela’s music the most, with numerous examples like; “Run My Race” (2013) sampling Fela’s “Teacher Don’t Teach Me

Nonsense” (1986), “Boom, Boom, Boom (2013) sampling “Lady” (1972), “Ring Ring” (2015) sampling “Coffin for Head of state” (1997) “Jealousy” (2015) and “Ye” (2018) sampling “Sorrow, Tears & Blood” (1977) (Ikwuagwu, 2019).

Several foreign artistes in the 21st century have also sampled Fela’s songs demonstrating his widespread influence. Some of these artistes include; J. Cole in his song, “Let Nas Down”

(2013), where he sampled Fela’s “Gentleman” (1973), Beyonce and Jay Z in their *Homecoming Live* performance of “Déjà vu” (2019), sampling beats from “Zombie” (1976), and Nas in his “Warrior Song” (2002) which features Alicia Keys, sampling Fela’s “Na Poi” (1972) among

others.

This qualitative research utilizes exploratory and descriptive research design to unpack

Nigeria’s global music influence. It combines literature review on Nigerian music, global music trends, and cultural exchange, as well as thematic and content analysis of Nigerian music genres. This study seeks to explore the impact of contemporary Nigerian music on global music trends and culture, using the theoretical framework of Cultural Hybridity Theory (Bhabha, 1994), and Music Diffusion Theory (Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

# The Impact of Contemporary Nigerian Music on Global Music Trends and Culture

Nigerian popular music has made a substantial contribution to the globalization of African music through its Afrobeats genre. Nigerian artistes have achieved international acclaim, bringing African sounds and rhythms to mainstream audiences worldwide. Their successes have paved the way for other African artistes, which guarantee increased global interest in African music and more collaborations between African and international music superstars. As a result, African music has gained a prominent and respected place in the global music industry. This respect and popularity continue to reflect in the multiple international awards nominations of Nigerian artistes. In 2020, Burna Boy received his first Grammy nomination for his album "African Giant," in the Best World Music Album category. This nomination marked a major recognition of his talent and the global impact of Afro-fusion music. The Album, “African Giant,” had multiple global hit songs like “Ye”, “Dangote”, “Gbona”, “Killin dem” and perhaps the more popular “On the low.” The following year (2021), Burna Boy won the Grammy Award for Best World Music Album with his album "Twice as Tall." This landmark win solidified his place as a trailblazer in the global music industry, showcasing his ability to blend Afrobeat, dancehall, reggae, and pop influences into a unique and compelling sound.

Another honourable moment in the history of Afrobeats is Wizkid’s Grammy award for the best music video of 2021 in collaboration with Beyonce, Saint JHN and Blue Ivy on the hit track “Brown Skin Girl,” a popular music that celebrates and uplifts brown skin, emphasizing beauty and confidence in the natural appearance of blacks. Wizkid himself is no stranger to the global stage as he had previously topped various charts and carted many MTV and BET awards.

He had featured the likes of Drake in his hit song “Come Closer” (2017) and was likewise featured in the fan-made hit song “Drake One Dance” (2017), which topped international music

charts despite not being an official song from Drake.

This continued dominance of Nigerian popular music and indeed the rise of African music prompted the Grammy awards in 2023 to create a new category in honour of quality African music performances known as The Grammy Awards for Best African Music

Performance. The inaugural award had several Nigerian nominees like Asake, Burna Boy, Ayra Starr, Davido and Olamide. The award was however won by South Africa’s Tyler, for her hit song “Water.”

The Afrobeats revolution has dramatically reshaped the cultural landscape of Nigerian music on a global scale beyond the numerous awards and accolades received by Nigerian artistes. The genre has also gained significant traction in international music scene. Major concerts, world tours and performances at globally renowned venues have showcased Nigerian talents to broader audiences. In 2018, Wizkid became the first Afrobeats artiste to sell out the *O2*

*Arena* in London, setting a precedent that other Nigerian artistes would later follow. Shortly in

2019, Davido sold out same arena with critically acclaimed performances, followed by Burna Boy in 2021 and most recently, Rema and Asake in 2023. Burna Boy is the first and only African artiste to sell out the Maddison Square Garden, New York with his “One Night in Space” solo concert on 28th April 2022. Burna Boy alongside Tems and Rema performed at halftime break at the NBA All-Star games in 2023. Some other Nigerian artistes performing at global events include; Tiwa Savage at the coronation of King Charles III of England in 2023, Rema performing his global hit “Calm Down” at the 2023 Ballon d’Or Ceremony, Ckay perfoming “Love Nwantiti” at the African Nations Championship in Algiers Algeria, Burna Boy performing at the 2023 UEFA Champions League Final kick-off show, Davido performing at the

Professional Footballers’ Association Awards and 50th anniversary at the Lowry Theatre in

Manchester UK as well as his joint performance at 2022 FIFA World Cup Final in Qatar (Ajayi, 2023).

Nigerian music stars have played significant roles in popularizing other African music genres beyond its borders, leveraging on its robust music industry, influential artistes and global reach. This cross-cultural pollination has not only enriched the Nigerian music scene but also brought diverse African sounds to the global stage. The biggest example of this can be traced to the trendy “Amapiano” genre. *Amapiano* is a popular South African music genre that has now been adapted into several other African cultures. It is a subgenre of kwaito and house music that emerged in South Africa in the mid-2010s. It is a hybrid of deep house, gqom, jazz, soul and lounge music characterized by synths and wide percussive basslines (Amapiano, 2024). Some of

Nigeria’s biggest hits of 2021 featured the Amapiano sounds, including Reekado Banks’s “Ozumba Mbadiwe,” Rema’s “Woman,” Adekunle Gold’s “High” and Loljay’s “Monalisa”

amongs a variety of others (Onu, 2022). Loljay’s “Monalisa” has also been remixed with the international music star and dance sensation, Chris Brown in 2022.

Perhaps, Asake’s 2023 hit “Amapiano” can arguably be regarded as the biggest Amapiano, song on a global scale. The hit single earned Asake a Grammy nomination alongside Olamide for the 2023 Grammy awards, after ranking 1st on *itunes*, *Sportify* and *Applemusic* for the better part of the year. Also collaborating with South African Amapiano musicians, some Nigerian artistes like Kolaboy and Kcee refixed the Amapiano sound, infusing local Igbo traditional flute and styling the subgenre as “Ojapiano.” Examples of songs in this subgenre are

Kolaboy’s “Kolapiano” and Kcee’s “Ojaginger,” both released in 2023.

Another noteworthy contribution of Nigerian music to the global music industry is its contemporary dance steps. Hardly these days is a popular Nigerian song released without an accompanying dance or sets of dance steps, with social media dance challenges, whether it be “ethigi”, “skelewu”, “shoki”, “zanku” or the “happy feet dance” steps, there seems to be a rythymic set high energy dance moves that blend seamlessly with most Afrobeats and Amapiano songs. While most of these dances have roots in the traditional Nigerian dances with heavy influences from western pop culture dance steps, others are either a mixture of Nigerian dance steps and other African dance steps, or are created from the pool of existing popular dance steps in the Naija pop culture.

# Afrobeats: Global Dissemination and Cultural Exchange

The Nigerian popular music or what can now be called contemporary Nigerian music, has been evolving since recent decades, specifically from the colonial period, steadily through the 80s and 90s, till it has become the sensational Afrobeats. According to Kunle Tejuoso, Naija pop could be traced back to the 80s, at the time when the major influences on the music made was from disco, funk and pop into the Nigerian music scene that was localized to birth a new Nigerian sound. Artists like Bongos Ikwue, Chris Okotie, Onyeka Onwenu etc. were some of the Naija Pop musicians around this time (Osika & Aromiro, 2022). Still in this period of 1980s under review, there came another influence on Naija pop music from Reggae, a Jamaican sound popularized by Bob Marley which went on to become one of the mainstay genres in Nigerian music. Reggae Dancehall flourished in the 80s and 90s with talented artistes likes Ras kimono, Daddy Showkey, Baba Frayo and Majek Fashek all becoming household names with the genre (Osika & Aromiro, 2022).

In the early 2000s, the influence on Naija pop music was from the U.S. Hip-hop. The invasion of Hip-hop did not only come with rap, but with the total repackaging of culture, graffitiing, dying, breakdancing, fashion and diskjockeying (Shoniya, 2022), the latter three would prepare the Nigerian music scene for the breakthrough it was to achieve on the global stage. During this intermediary phase, the Nigerian music scene would continue to grow rapidly and dynamically with groups like The Remedies, which was a pioneering Nigerian hip-hop music group. It consisted of Eedris Abdulkareem, Tony Tetuila and Eddy Remedy (also known as Eddy Montana). Others artistes of this era include Freestyle, 2Face, Blackface, Trybesmen, Style Plus etc. By the 2010s, P-Square, MI Abaga, Dbanj, Don Jazzy, May D, Timaya, 9ice,

D’banj, Duncan Mighty, Faze, J Martins, Iyanya, Flavour, Nigga Raw, among several others were at the forefront of the industry, gradually pushing Nigerian music to internal recognition on the African stage. It was at this point these Nigerian artistes started taking major music tours around Africa and even into Europe. Nigeria’s music footprint had become too big to ignore as many artistes began collaborating with not just other African artistes but also international heavyweight artistes at the time. Examples are P-Square’s collaboration with Maybach Music’s RickRoss on the remix of the hit track “Beautiful Onyinye” (2011), and another remix with Akon on the track “Chop my money” (2012).

It is important to note that the language of contemporary Nigerian music is predominantly the Pidgin English. Why? Nigeria is a country with over 250 ethnic groups and over 500 languages, and even with English as the official language, there is still not any of the spoken languages in the country that could cut across all tribes and classes of the Nigerian society as much as the pidgin English. It is the official informal language of Nigeria and by extension, the official language of the Nigerian music industry. Pidgin English is often mixed with standard Nigerian English and the indigenous languages of the artistes in their various songs. For example, the likes of P-Square and Flavour used a mixture of the Igbo language with the aforementioned languages to create beautiful lyrics that blended seamlessly. The likes of Dbanj, and a wave of Yoruba born contemporary musicians would enter the scene in the mid2010s and sing with heavy influences from the Yoruba culture. Today the Nigerian music industry seems to be heavily influenced by the Yoruba language and culture, so much so that Adedeji argues that artistes from other tribal affinities now have to embrace the language and culture of the Yoruba in order to enter the mainstream of artistic recognition (2010).

The rise of Afrobeats in the 2010s would see contemporary Nigerian music inculcate more and more of traditional tunes, indigenous languages and a blend of traditional dance steps with contemporary dance steps. One overriding observation of Afrobeats in the 2010s is that large percentage of lyrics were made with indigenous languages, as artistes were becoming more comfortable singing in their native tongues, particularly the Yoruba language. Most of these songs were rap lyrics, like Olamide’s “Bobo” (2015) and “Lagos Boys” (2015), as well as Igbo rap songs like Phyno’s “Connect” and Zorro’s “Ogene” featuring Flavour (2016), the latter, purely a traditional Igbo hit. This trend has continued so much so that it has become seemingly difficult to distinguish a traditional Nigerian song from an Afrobeats song in the media.

# Fusion of Contemporary Nigerian Music with Dance

Contemporary music and dance in Nigeria represent a vibrant and dynamic aspect of the country's cultural landscape, blending traditional African elements with modern influences. Nigerian music, particularly the Afrobeats has gained international acclaim, with its artistes continuing to push boundaries and garner global recognition. These artists incorporate elements of highlife, juju, fuji, and hip-hop, creating a unique sound that resonates domestically and worldwide. Nigerian dance is equally diverse and expressive. Traditional dance forms like the

Bata, Atilogwu, and Sharo have been infused with contemporary styles such as hip-hop, Afrobeat dance, and Azonto. Dance in Nigeria is often a communal activity, reflecting social and cultural narratives. The emergence of dance crews and competitions have further propelled the art form, making it a significant part of Nigeria's entertainment industry.

Nigerian contemporary dances have been fluid and dynamic. Initially originating from indigenous dances, contemporary Nigerian dances over the years have been influenced by western dance, traditional dance, African dance, etc. One of the most popular contemporary dances in the early 2000s was the “break dance,” an energetic dance form fashioned and popularized by African Americans and it includes stylized footwork, athletic moves, freezes, power moves, downrock, toprock, and is characterized by improvisations (Britannica, 2024).

This dance also incorporates Michael Jackson’s signature “moonwalk.”

Some of the popular Nigerian contemporary dances of the 2000s till date are; the “Azonto” dance, originating from Ghana with the hit song of the same name by Fuse ODG, it became a sensation in Nigeria. The dance incorporates a variety of moves, including hand gestures, and body isolations. Azonto dance like many of the contemporary dances in Nigeria is fun and freestyle in nature. Another is the “Makossa” dance. This dance was very popular in the 2000s, originating from Cameroon. Makossa means dance; it is a vibrant and sensual dance that combines quick waist movements, hip rotations and footwork. This dance was popularized by the artistes Awilo Longomba and Koffi Olomide, and it quickly spread through Africa and till date is still one of the most popular dances in Nigeria. The “Alanta” dance became a household dance in Nigeria in the 2007/2008; this dance involves exaggerated leg and arm movements.

Then there was “Skelewu” created and popularized by Davido, “Shoki” a street dance by Lil Kesh, “Etighi” or “kukere”, popularized by Iyanya, “Zanku” invented by Zlatan (which literally translates ‘Zlatan Abeg no Kill Us’ (Shoniya, 2022). Other street dances like, “Shaku Shaku” and “Buga” popularized by Kizz Daniel with his hit single of the same name featuring Tekno (2023). Shaku Shaku and Buga have become internet sensations especially on Tiktok, and have created a new form of social identity and “Gen Z” youth culture among Nigerians, both home and abroad.

# Conclusion

Marshal Maclullan made the prediction that the technological revolution would shrink the planet in terms of both time and space (As cited in Jayeola & Nwonye, 2017). From the perspective of popular culture, that is precisely what has happened, and musicians from Nigeria have seized the chance to market Nigerian culture via their music. They have gained and continue to gain a lot of admirers by elevating the Nigerian identity in popular culture, and bringing attention to African sounds on a worldwide scale. Because of their successes, they have received applause from critics throughout the world, and accolades and endorsements for African and Nigerian music, solidifying the place of Nigerian culture in global popular culture. They have been successful in doing this by fusing different traditional and foreign dances with modern sounds, ingeniously reinterpreting modern music, and developing new identities for popular culture.

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