

Trends in Stylistic Developments of Nigerian Highlife Music

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Abstract

The discourse on the origin and regional practices of Highlife music in Africa is multifaceted and engenders a diversity of perspectives among scholars. It is a subject that not only explores the musical aspects but also delves into the historical, cultural, and social dimensions of this vibrant genre. Equally, the journey and spread of Highlife music in Nigeria have been scholarly appreciated, appraised, and documented. However, the fascination with the folk musical undercurrents in the new popular Highlife style has inspired artistic diversifications and stylistic sophistication in contemporary Nigerian Highlife music. These recent interpretations and their exponents remain largely understudied, and therefore barely documented. Rather, there exists a flood of assumptions, opinions, and facts from reporters whose contributions lie in scratches and parchments, scattered here and there in periodicals. Even at that, the materials are seasoned with sectional thoughts. Leaning heavily on a historical-descriptive research design, this study aims to contribute formal documentation of identifiable trends in stylistic developments and artistic interpretations of Nigerian Highlife music.

Keywords: Highlife, History, Eras, Styles, Socioeconomics, Urbanization

Introduction

Highlife is considered the authentic popular music of Africa—especially on the West Coast. It is a genre that originated in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria and Ghana, during the early 20th century. It blends elements of traditional African rhythms with Western musical influences, such as jazz and swing. Highlife music is a tool for the integration of people into the norms and values of their culture. It is a veritable tool for mobilization and social control. The philosophy of Highlife accommodates public enlightenment and social awareness, as well as facilitates understanding and agreement

amongst the people within a culture. Through the lyrics, Highlife music extols the virtues of heroism, patriotism, love, courage, sacrifice, and perseverance. Oftentimes, these virtues are communicated through the lyrics in dirges, praises, insults, and satire.

The historical context within which Nigerian Highlife music developed includes colonialism, independence movements, and socioeconomic struggles. Nigeria was under British rule during the colonial era, which influenced the country's music scene. Western instruments, such as guitars, brass instruments, and pianos, were introduced, merging with

traditional African percussion instruments to create a unique sound. This fusion of traditional African rhythms and Western musical influences gave birth to Highlife music (Edeh & Egbunike, 2022; Omojola, 2009).

Socioeconomic factors played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of Highlife music in Nigeria. Nigeria's post-colonial history has been marked by social and economic challenges, including rapid urbanization, rural-urban migration, and economic inequality. Highlife music served as an expression of these experiences, providing a platform for artistes to highlight the struggles, aspirations, and dreams of the Nigerian people. Prominent Highlife musicians emerged during this era, using their music to reflect the realities of Nigerian society. Their songs addressed themes such as love, politics, hardship, and cultural identity, resonating with audiences across the country. Highlife music became not just a form of entertainment but a cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in the fabric of Nigerian society. It became a vehicle for social commentary, a means to celebrate cultural heritage, and a medium to bridge societal divides (Igbi, 2015; Ngobili, 2021).

Nigerian Highlife songs are generally sung in various vernaculars, including Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Kalabari, Efik, and Idoma. In addition to vernacular languages, Pidgin-English is widely used in Nigerian Highlife music. Pidgin-English is a simplified form of English, with influences from various Nigerian languages and English creoles. It is often referred to as "All-man

language" because it is a language understood by many Nigerians, regardless of their ethnic background. Using Pidgin-English in Highlife songs helps to bridge linguistic barriers and reach a broader audience within Nigeria and beyond. While vernacular languages and Pidgin-English dominate Nigerian Highlife music, there are also songs rendered in the English language. These songs cater to a more global audience and are often performed by artistes who aim to gain international recognition. English language Highlife songs may also be used to convey specific messages or themes that resonate with a wider audience. Generally, the use of various languages in Nigerian Highlife music adds depth, diversity, and cultural richness to the genre. It allows artistes to express themselves authentically and connect with listeners on different levels (Onwuegbuna, 2011).

Historical Backgrounds and Periodization

Historical antecedents of Nigeria as a nation, which reflects the politico-socioeconomic inflections, can be appreciated in Pascal G. Dozie's (2001) three divisions of periodization – eras of Festivals, Masquerades, and Dancing in the Sun. These divisions identify "the undulating phases that have marked the nation's checkered epochs". The first is the pre- and post-independent (up to the first republic) period of 1930-1967. He tags this Era of Festivals. The second period is between 1968 and 1998 which Dozie (2001) describes as the Era of Masquerades. The third is from 1999 to date. Dozie (2001) delineates this period

as the Era of Dancing in the Sun. In investigating trends in stylistic developments in Highlife music in Nigeria, this paper adopts Dozie's (2001) periodization. Justification for the adoption lies in the fact that trends in popular music evolve along the lines of political, social, and economic inflections of human experiences. Highlife has served as a medium for expressing socio-political commentary, cultural identity, and resistance against colonialism and social injustices. It became a platform for artistes to voice their opinions on issues such as independence, Pan-Africanism, and cultural preservation.

The Era of Festivals was characterized by relative policy stability, incremental economic growth, good external image, and healthy competition. "Simply put, we were building a great nation based on traditional institutions and practices that have typically been successful elsewhere" (Dozie 2001, p.8). The Aba Women Riots of 1929 sounded a note of warning of eminent exertion of self-awareness of a people who were already fed up with the dehumanizing dominance of colonial rule. In 1931, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) was formed as a pressure group. Public enlightenment became charged as the opening of the Carter Bridge in the same year facilitated communication between the once remote settlements in the city of Lagos; the Nigerian nationalists whose influx from overseas became uncontrollable championed this new awareness (Ajayi & Espie, 1979). It was in the 30s that Highlife music sprouted as Nigeria's indigenous popular music.

From this point on, the waxing scale of Highlife—along with other facets of Nigeria's historical and socioeconomic life—remained in the ascendant till it climaxed in 1967 (Akpabot, 1989).

The pogrom in the North and the reprisals in the South resulted in the Nigeria-Biafra civil war in 1967. This marks the beginning of the Era of Masquerades. It became an era of masquerading in inter-ethnic relationships in a nation of 'one people, one destiny'. Dozie (2001) notes:

The period was fraught with white elephant projects, cement armada phenomenon, 'essential' commodities, disappearing windfall revenues from crude oil exports, jumbo loans, 419 phenomenon, sycophancy, robbery, violence, great distortion of national values under the military, and a near-complete absence of standards at all spheres of national life (p.8).

This period (1968–1998) saw a nation that was highly vulnerable to all forms of foreign incursions. Alien commodities—including music—were freely imported and disseminated. It was so terrible that some community leaders accepted foreign currency to play host to toxic waste. Onyeka Onwenu (1984) had earlier described this period as an era of 'Squandering of Riches'. And some important riches that were equally squandered happened to be the cultural heritage and national pride of Nigeria.

With the inception of Nigeria's fragile nascent democracy at the beginning of the present millennium, the nation, once again, engaged in

negotiating another chance at re-engineering and restructuring the polity for the better. This era ignited a general explosion of native emotions, including the crusade for the revival of cultural values. The crucial stance of this era provided a rare opportunity for serious introspection and a return to the foundation principles of the nation's ethos.

Antecedents of Nigerian Highlife Music

The emergence of a world popular culture, which inaugurated a musical diversification in the late 19th century, brought about dramatic transformations—especially urbanization and industrialization. This transformation introduced changes that disrupted traditional attitudes, lifestyles, and forms of artistic patronage while creating new urban social classes with new musical tastes. The new popular culture was largely driven by advancements in technology, transportation, and communication. The invention of the phonograph, radio, and later the television allowed for the dissemination of music on a global scale, breaking down barriers of time and distance. This led to the spread of various musical genres and styles across different regions and cultures. Urbanization and industrialization played a significant role in this transformation. As people migrated from rural areas to cities in search of employment opportunities, they brought with them their diverse musical traditions and preferences. The urban environment provided a melting pot for different musical styles to interact and

influence each other, resulting in the creation of new hybrid genres (Emielu, 2013; Oti, 2009).

The First and Second World Wars, fought between 1914 and 1945, as well as the advent of hi-tech communication media also served as a conduit for cultural transfer between Nigeria and the world at large. The technology-spurred industrialization brought about changes in the socio-economic structure of society. The rise of the middle class and the expansion of the working class created new social classes with different tastes and preferences in music. The urban bourgeoisie, for example, sought cultural refinement and sophistication, leading to the patronage of classical music and opera. On the other hand, the working class embraced popular music forms such as ragtime, jazz, and later rock and roll (Porter, 2014).

Drawing heavily on these historical-socioeconomic associations on the ground, Nigeria started witnessing the emergence of various foreign musical cultures in the forms of European regimental march and wind bands, the sea-shanties of seamen along the Gulf of Guinea and the Bights of Biafra, and the piano-accompanied hymns and cantata of the colonial Christianity. Collins (1996) reports that the same process was tenable in Ghana, while Akpabot (1989) praises the Protestant Movements for their liberality that gave room to acculturation—as opposed to the rigidity of Roman Catholicism. The Anglican Church missionaries, in particular, were very active in promoting the performance of European

religious and classical music in churches and mission schools. This led to the emergence of a generation of Nigerian musicians proficient in Western musical instruments. The introduction of Western musical instruments and the influence of Western musical styles, combined with indigenous musical traditions, led to the emergence of new musical genres, especially Highlife—which became popular in Nigeria and other West African countries. It incorporated Western musical elements while retaining indigenous rhythms and melodies. Islamic religious traditions also had an impact on the genre. Some Highlife artists incorporated Islamic chants and melodies into their music.

Before the end of the 1800s, Nigeria was already used to European colonial ballroom dances. Akpabot (1989) lists them as waltz, foxtrot, quickstep, and tango. Later in the 1920s and '30s, rhumba, conga, son Afro-Cubano, mambo, meringue, and cha-cha dances of Latin America were imported through phonograph records. The invention of the phonograph, radio, and later the television allowed for the dissemination of music on a global scale, breaking down barriers of time and distance. This further led to the spread of various musical genres and styles across different regions and cultures.

The emancipation of black slaves was more eventful than a remorseful show of benevolence from the white slave masters. The event of Industrial Revolution introduced mechanized equipment that replaced human hands in the mines and farms more efficiently. This invention reduced dependence on

the blacks for the supply of labour, thereby making the slaves less relevant in the mines and plantations. The effect, according to Hercules (1978), was that newly-found freedom and newly acquired-status presented new challenges and greater responsibilities. To cope with these strains and in response to various campaigns for repatriation, America shipped some of these freed slaves back to Africa. The majority of these returnees were resettled in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and Lagos, Nigeria (Buah, 1981; Euba, 1988; Onwuegbuna, 2015).

Euba (1988) reports that some of these freed slave returnees, who came from Brazil to settle in Lagos, founded what came to be known as the Brazilian community in Lagos. Part of their social activities included musicals that revealed a novel brand of African music composed of both Western and African elements in the areas of vocal delivery, instrumentation, and formal structure. In the words of Euba (1988):

While living in Brazil, members of the community were exposed to Latin American influences, and their cultural life in Lagos inevitably became a marriage of Latin American and indigenous Lagosian elements. The Lagos Brazilians were most likely the first to have used Western instruments in the performance of popular music in Nigeria (p. 119).

The response of Nigerians to this novel brand of popular music is worthy of note. They responded favourably because of the undercurrents of the musical contents and styles that were

purely African, and in that response, the Nigerian musicians became participatory in creating Nigerian versions of the new popular music.

Writing on the importation of foreign musical culture to Nigeria, Martins (2002) reports:

It developed from the external contact with local native patterns, generated by trading, free movements of people and goods at the end of the Second World War, and as the outgrowth of the needs of modern society and living. The involvement of the white recording engineers perfected the hybridization and the birth of the genre of music that came to be known as Highlife (p.37).

Through the indigenous entertainment music borne out of traditional travelling theatres, Nigeria responded sporadically but unanimously to a musical revolution, which Akpabot (1989) describes as “a deliberate protest against Western popular dance music which thrived in the country during the colonial era” (p.98). Each of these travelling theatres was characterized by long musical openings; and being a nation of over 250 ethnic groups, each party differed from region to region.

In the Western region, the concert parties staged *Obatala* festival of Oshogbo and *Egungun* festival of Oyo, amongst others; and the *Alarinjo* players helped in developing neo-folk dance music. The *Alarinjo* music leaned on the styles of *agidigbo* and *kokoma*—an early form of Ghanaian Highlife played with percussion instruments, which was introduced to Nigeria in the 1930s by

Ghanaian migrant workers in Nigeria (Collins, 1996). In the same era of the 1930s, Hubert Ogunde (the father of Nigerian theatre) formed the Yoruba Opera travelling theatre troupe, designed to lampoon colonial exploitation. In the East, the egalitarian nature of the region made it possible for the Easterners to dole out different entertainment music from age grades and moonlight plays. Amongst the Igbo, the entertainment music included *ifo*, *igede*, and *nkwa*; while in Kalabari, the *Ikaki* (tortoise) festival combined dance, music, visual arts, dialogue, and oral literature. All of these gave birth to a neo-folk dance music called *Dodokido*. The northern region, not given so much to travelling theatres, made the most impact around the Benue-Plateau region. The *Kwang Hir* puppet theatre of the Tiv people featured the *swange* dance, which was later transformed into a neo-folk known as *Bonsue* (Ifionu, 2012). From the three regions of Nigeria, therefore, came *Kokoma*, *Dodokido*, and *Bonsue* neo-folk dance music genres that in turn became the antecedents of Highlife music around the year 1930.

The Era of Festivals

A fusion of divergent notions garnered from exposure to various foreign musical cultures soon gave birth to a unique musical experience. This experience, which was a synthesis of African and Western musical traditions, involving new scales and modes, new styles, new harmonic principles, and new instruments, was first called Native Blues. Native Blues then became a national musical experience expressed on the European box guitar, sometimes

an accordion, two or more native instruments (like the traditional drum, thumb piano, shakers, rattles, etc.), and almost always a bottle tapped with a knife to produce high sounding notes; and all fused with indigenous dance rhythms. Some of the exponents of note in this genre were G.T. Onwuka, Okonkwo Adigwe, Benjamin Kokoro Aduronmu, Ojoge Daniel, Irewole Denge, and Israel Nwoba Njemanze (Okoro, 2005).

Soon after the Native Blues stabilized, Combo Bands emerged as an indigenous version of the then reigning Brass Bands of the European colonialists. Okoro (2005) reports that:

The necessity for the rising African elite to blend something of their tradition with the surging Western popular music which swept the cafes, night clubs, ballrooms, and public entertainment from the '30s on gave rise to a new brand of music, half indigenous and half Western (p.41).

A typical Combo band comprised brass, woodwinds, drums, and guitar in its choice of instrumentation; and the songs were done in indigenous, Pidgin, and/or English languages. The early professionals in this genre were Bobby Benson, Soji Lijadu, and Lord Edison. Groups like Effiom Brass, New Bethel School Brass, and Ikot Ekan Brass Bands also existed.

As the Combo Bands thrived amongst the elites, the low class who also wanted a piece of the action, soon found an answer to their need for the entertainment of the new social order. The Native Blues that grew out of palm-

wine drinking shacks metamorphosed into small but more subdued guitar-and-percussion ensembles known as Guitar Bands. These bands played two electric guitars, one electric bass guitar, a set of trap drums, a set of conga drums, and sometimes an electronic keyboard was added, as well as one trumpet and/or one saxophone. According to Idonije (2002),

One of the most influential of the early outfits was the West African Rhythm Brothers Band, formed by Ambrose Campbell in 1947 with a group of ex-service men and students. Their main pre-occupation was to create a new 'Africanized' dance music type in response to the smooth Western big bands that existed at the time. With an instrumental line-up that included *shekere* and talking drum, and of course the guitar and mandolin, the band brought a diversity of indigenous folk music into the spotlight as a measure of our culture (p.30).

The end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s saw the mingling of two genres of Highlife music: the already-established Guitar bands and the 'new' big bands known as the Dance Bands. Most of these bands grew out of the Combo bands and Dance Orchestras that belonged to the highbrow society of civil servants and their likes in the private sector. The Dance bands employed a full horns section of trombones, trumpets, cornet, saxophones, clarinet, and even flute; rhythm and lead guitar, and double bass or electric bass guitar, and, at times even violins, made up the strings section. The

percussions included a set of conga drums, shakers, and claves. The electronic keyboard was also introduced. These bands equally enriched the vocal lines of the lead vocalists by introducing, at least, three professional backup singers who sang in three harmonic parts—with other instrumentalists doubling as backup singers—to produce a dense harmonic texture in the vocals.

The Dance bands artistically packaged and performed rich indigenous melodies through the media of swing, jazz, and twist. Akpabot (1989) describes these styles as acculturated music that leaned towards playing a brand of music that reflected the African cultural heritage with European instruments. In his words:

Two trends are easily discernible here. The first one being those musicians who played traditionally-derived music on European instruments; and the other, those who discarded European dance band instruments to form small groups of performers comprising a guitarist, who was usually also the solo singer supported by secondary traditional drums (p.99).

Bobby Benson and his Jam Session Orchestra remained at the top of the list of the professionals of this new development. Other dance bands included Sam Akpabot and the All Stars, Eddie Okonta and the Jifabro Aces, Stephen Amechi and the Rhythm Skies, Chris Ajilo and the Cubanos, Bala Miller and the Harbours, Bill Friday and the Ambassadors, Eric Onugha and the

Ericos, and E.C. Arinze and the Empire Rhythm Orchestra. Of equal prominence were Charles Iwegbue and the Archebogs, Atomic Seven of Aba, Roy Chicago and the Rhythm Dandies, and Emperor Erasmus Januwari (Onwuegbuna, 2011; 2012).

Towards the end of the year 1949, the Ghanaian crowned king of Highlife, E.T. Mensah and his Tempos Dance Band were invited to Lagos by a society of Ghanaians in the city. During their one-week stay in Nigeria, the Tempos and Mensah entertained with a style of music that was not too different from what the Nigerian dance bands were already playing—indigenous folklore and melodies delivered through the media of Western musical instruments. The only difference was that the Ghanaians called their music Highlife; a generic term for the lifestyle of the high and privileged middle-class citizens of the emerging urban societies in Africa at the time (Collins, 1996).

Lari Williams (2001) reports that Bobby Benson was the first to adopt the name, *Highlife*, and followed it up with the release of his first big Highlife hit, *Taxi Driver*. Later, it was Victor Olaiya, who broke away from the Bobby Benson Jam Session and formed his Cool Cats Band that fully embraced the name. Before the declaration of independence from colonial rule in 1960, many Highlife bands had already consolidated their positions in different parts of Nigeria. Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson sited his base at Dolphin Café, Onitsha. Dan Satch Joseph and the Atomic Eight were residents at Travellers' Lodge, Aba while the Paradise Rhythm Dance Orchestra was

based in Calabar. In the northern part of the country, Satche Ayo and the Sahara All Stars Band were based in Jos. Ibadan harboured Eddy Okonta and the Jofabro Aces, Zeb Philips and the Blue Nine, amongst others (Williams, 2001).

Lagos witnessed a concentration of major exponents who performed in regular clubs and hotels where they were resident bands. E. C. Arinze entertained at Kakadu Hotel, Yaba, Eric Onugha at Central Hotel within the vicinity, and Victor Olaiya at Stadium Hotel. Roy Chicago thrilled his audience at Abalabi Hotel, Mushin, Adeolu Akinsanya and his Western Toppers at Western Hotel, Mushin, and Charles Iwegbue at Lido Bar, Agege Motor Road. Stephen Amechi was often featured at Empire Hotel, Idioro. The Kaban Bamboo along Ikorodu Road was the rendezvous for Bobby Benson, while Zeal Onyia who once played trumpet in Bobby's and in E.T. Mensah's bands moved to Ambassador Hotel (Idonije, 2000a).

Highlife music so ruled the airwaves that at the time of Independence in 1960, it was enjoying a widespread and profound acceptance. This era of nationalism and political awakening inspired Highlife musicians to compose songs that celebrated Nigerian identity and advocated for social and political change. This musical style, according to Idonije (2000a), "was so popular that it did not require any legislation or entrenched constitutional provision for it to be accepted as the national music of the country" (p.54). Victor Olaiya and his All Stars Orchestra who mounted the dais on Independence Day, had the rare opportunity to

entertain dignitaries like Princess Alexandria of Kent, Sir James Robertson (representing Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain), and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa with Highlife music (Uhakheme, 2000).

By the year 1967, it became almost impossible to keep track of the record of Highlife bands in the country. It was rather easier to count how many bands were not playing Highlife than to count the other way around. However, worthy of mention were names like King Kenny Tone, Fatai Rolling Dollar, Orlando Julius, Inyang Henshaw, and the Koola Lobitos. Summarizing this era, Williams (2001) writes:

All told, the early sixties was a big boom for Highlife. The economy of Nigeria was vibrant, as multi-national recording companions such as E.M.I, Decca and Philips operated at full capacity. Artists and repertoire managers sought for new recording stars; and the industry thrived. The early sixties experienced a welcome variety from various bands even though it was short-lived (p.33).

These companies made available to Nigeria the variant forms of recorded Highlife music of its neighbours. From Cameroon came *Makossa* and *Bikutsi*. *Soukous* and *Liquour-Liquour* (called *Ikwokirikwo* in Nigeria) came from Congo/Zaire, while Benin Republic supplied *Zouk* and *Goghahoun*. Tanzania's *Yetu*, Sierra Leone's *Maringa*, and Cape Verde's *Morna* were all imported into Nigeria. Other Highlife variants imported in Nigeria include *Benga/Taarab* of Kenya, *Chimurenga* and

Jiti of Zimbabwe, and South Africa's *Marabi/Mbaquanga* (Broughton, 1994; Collins, 1992; Ekwueme, 2004; Ewens, 1991; Gillet, 2014; Onwuegbuna, 2015). This condition made inevitable the development of different styles of not only Highlife but also other forms of popular music in Nigeria. Commercialization of the genre created a steep competition in the music business and also challenged the creative imaginations of the musicians.

The stratified social order in Nigeria at the time also defined the choices of musical listenership. Music patronage and sponsorship were mostly kept in the hands of the ruling class by the privilege of their economic and political might. The social activities that involved this *nouveau riche* urban class could not go without the presence of some live musical performances. This class was particular about flamboyancy and copious displays of wealth. The occasion could be the commissioning of a house project, taking of a new wife, taking of a chieftaincy title, or any of such parties. The musicians were often commissioned to deliver the praises of the high and mighty of the society.

The development of different styles in early Highlife music of Nigeria started with the minstrels who were the first to respond to the praise-singing needs of the society. Graham (1994) recalls that Baba Tunde King is credited with the coining of the term, *Juju Music* to address the *Owambe* music that developed out of the Native Blues in the 1930s and captured the interest of the Yoruba minstrels. The development of this variant was further expanded by Ayinde Bakare, Tunde Nightingale, and

J. Oyeshiku. However, it was I. K. Dairo who brought the genre to the limelight when, in 1957, he introduced new elements such as the electric guitar, accordion, and the *dundun* talking drum. His efforts earned him the prestigious MBE (Member of British Empire) Award in 1963. Following the trails beaten by Dairo, Ebenezer Obey, in 1964 formed his big band Juju Highlife group, the International Brothers. Competition within the new genre became sharp with Sunny Ade leading a fast and furious development with the introduction of as many as four electric guitars, various keyboards, Hawaiian sitars, trap sets, and a wide range of traditional and modern percussions. He also featured numerous backup vocalists (Oni, 2011; Waterman, 2014).

Julius O. Araba initiated the journey toward the evolution of the outrageous Afrobeat variant. In the early 1940s, Araba started recording his dreamy *Juju* tunes; but a decade later, he saw a need to inject new waves into his style. By the infusion of Haruna Ishola's *Apala* music with *Juju*—expressed through electric guitar, locally made two-stringed double bass, and other traditional instruments of Juju music, Araba added more depth to his brand of Juju music. This new creation he called *Afro Skiffle*. Even though Ebenezer Obey and Sunny Ade stayed with the Juju genre, Akpabot reports that they copied, on a grander scale, the innovations of Araba (Akpabot, 1989).

Starting from the middle of the 1960s, individual expressions of national styles became the vogue. Orlando Julius and Fela Anikulapo (then Ransome)

Kuti introduced, yet, another variant of Highlife music called *Afrobeat*. Tinkering with Geraldo Pino's Afro-soul style, Fela combined these soulful tunes with elements of Highlife, Jazz, Afro-Cuban, and traditional Yoruba music to define a distinctive rhythm called Afrobeat.

In mid-western Nigeria, the Edo-born Victor Uwaifo explored the rich musical culture of the Bini to create his variant of Highlife music which, at various stages, he had called *Ekassa*, *Akwete*, *Mutaba*, *Shadow*, and *Sasakossa*. Since the formation of his Melody Maestros in 1965, Uwaifo persistently tried to reflect in his music the intriguing beats and language of Edo culture, as well as the full spectrum of the colourful hues of Akwete hand-woven cloth material. Other variants that developed from this region include *Bini*, *Ukwuani*, and *Ika* (Collins, 1996; Emielu, 2013).

In Igbo-speaking eastern Nigeria, it was the introduction of *Pachanga Meringue* variant by Stephen Osita Osadebe in 1966 that led to other variants like *Sengwala*, *Ikwokirikwo*, and *Ogene Sound*. Osadebe, Mike Ejeagha, Saint Augustine, Herbart Udemba, and their contemporaries introduced elements of the Meringue dance of the Dominican Republic to Highlife and laced it with the declamations that were borrowed from the Igbo traditional music. This style is still evolving more complex variants to date. Peacocks, Oriental Brothers, Oliver De Coque, Bright Chimezie, and Ken Nwofor have all benefited from this innovation. The contagious influence of the iconic Highlife music spread even into other spheres of life that were not concerned

with music. For instance, Highlife became the brand name of a very lucrative bread industry in Aba; there is also a bus stop called Highlife Bus Stop in Aba; a transport company in the same city bears the name *Highlife All the Way*; and the fashion industries created a design in women's wears called Highlife. Highlife musicians also played a role in reinventing highlife fashion. They incorporated elements of traditional Nigerian attire, such as the agbada and Ankara fabric, into their stage costumes, creating a fusion of traditional and contemporary fashion styles (Collins, 2018; Onwuegbuna & Igbokwe, 2020).

The Era of Masquerades

Nigeria experienced several military coups and periods of military rule from the 1960s to the 1990s. Highlife musicians often used their music to criticize the government, express societal frustrations, and call for political reform. The first major setback experienced by Highlife came in 1967 with the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted until 1970. Idonije (2000b) reports the inception of this era of decline thus:

Lagos had the largest number of Highlife musicians, most of whom were from the East of the Niger. They all moved out; and even though some were conscripted into the army as musicians, it was to complement war effort rather than to enhance the evolution of the nation's musical culture (p.35).

Lagos was not the only city that was affected by the relocation of the

sojourning Eastern musicians, but the whole of Western and Northern parts of the country suffered the same fate. Earlier in 1963, Celestine Ukwu, an Igbo-born Highlife musician had to sojourn in Maiduguri where he formed the African Band with some of his friends. After three months of poor patronage, he moved to Zaria to form another band known as the Republic Knights. The advent of the war forced him to move down to Onitsha where he formed the Civil Starlites Band. As Highlife music moved farther East, the West witnessed a near-dearth of the genre; leaving a few loyalists like Victor Olaiya to compete with the burgeoning *Juju* and *Apala* variants. The North, which had only Bala Miller in Kaduna, was worse hit by the vagaries of the war, entertainment-wise.

By the time the war ended in 1970, the East was witnessing an overflow of Highlife musicians. The Nigerian society was in flux. Many upcoming musicians side-lined Highlife and explored Afro-rock, Afro-calypso, Afro-reggae, and Afro-funk as new forms of popular music; to sound different and attract commercial investors. The exponents were the Black Stones of Port Harcourt, Funkees, Apostles, Wings, and Sweet Breeze of Aba, One World and Hi-Grades of Enugu, Aktions of Ikot Ekpene, and the Strangers of Owerri. Others like Wrinklers Experience, Doves, Founders 15, and Semi-Colon also ruled the airwaves. However, the embers of Highlife were kept aflame by new and vibrant bands of Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson, Eddy Okwedi, Celestine

Ukwu, Stephen Osita Osadebe, and Mike Ejeagha.

The creative rationalizations and modifications that were later introduced to Highlife music were felt in stylistic fusions and instrumental diversifications. I. K. Diaro introduced the accordion to his music, thereby producing a sound that was traditional and at the same time new—a novelty and continuity that the people valued and embraced. Celestine Ukwu introduced the vibraphone to his band to bring back the effect of the *ubo-aka* (thumb piano). Joe Nez used the electronic organ to support his *calypsonic* rhythms, while the *wah-wah* and *cry-baby* electric guitar effects gave a *rocky* feeling to Osita Osadebe's music. In stylistic experimentation, Inyang Henshaw played the slap-and-pull technique of bass guitar to *funkify* his Highlife music.

While the nation recuperated from the ravages of the civil war, most young musicians explored the commercial viability of Afro-rock and other popular genres at the abandonment of Highlife. However, the faithful loyalists stayed in their camps firmly enough to even attract some younger recruits who threw their vive and valour behind Highlife to ensure its continuity. Among these loyalists were Chief Stephen Osita Osadebe, Raphael Amarabem and the Peacocks, Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson, Dr. Victor Olaiya, Baby-face Paul, Celestine Ukwu, Paulson Kalu, Mike Ejeagha, David Bull and the Professional Seagulls, and Sunny Brown. Among the new entrants were Oriental Brothers, Muddy Ibe, Goddy Ezike, Oliver De Coque, Prince Nico Mbarga, Ali Chukwuma, Ikenga

Super Stars, and Ifeanyi Ordo (Okafor, 2019; Onwuegbuna, 2011; 2012).

The people's craze for Afro-rock did not last for a decade. Many rock bands had to disband. Inevitably, the Highlife scene witnessed an influx of a cream of vibrant young talented musicians whose rhythm presented unprecedented agitation in Highlife rhythm. Oriental Brothers debuted with songs laced with the guitar licks of neighbouring Cameroon *Makossa* while Oliver De Coque presented powerful acrobatic guitar styles and the fast tempo of the Congolese *Liquour-Liquour*. Ikenga Super Stars explored the *Liquour-Liquour* and *soukous* dance rhythms of the Congo.

But, it was Prince Nico Mbarga's simple but beautifully delivered *Sweet Mother* of 1976 that caught on even across the continents of Africa. Mbarga's Cameroonian lineage combined with his Nigerian background, and his use of Pidgin English helped in recovering the distant and near Highlife audience. And the commercial success of his *Sweet Mother* was too juicy to be ignored by aspiring musicians. In 1982, Ifeanyi Ordo—an ex-Rex Lawson guitarist—released his only album, *Back to Highlife*, as a show of his concern towards the need for Nigerian youth to return to their cultural heritage. That album, recorded at Godiak Studios under the supervision of the man who was Sonny Okosun's first music master—Goddy Oku, is sung in the English language throughout. The idea was to make the message of the lyrics available to all audiences.

This call got a backing in 1990 when Oliver De Coque declared war on

Highlife music. Oliver, who coincidentally has a striking physical resemblance with Ifeanyi Ordo, pursued this war headlong with the release of his album, *Musik Africa*. Until his death, Oliver was consistently releasing albums. In his hit song, *Social Man*, he even experimented on hip-hop rap as bait to catch the interest of the youth in Highlife. Also making his contributions to ensuring the continuity of Highlife, an ex-Celestine Ukwu guitarist, award-winning Emmantex Ikediashi, with his Black Tops Band, recorded a series of albums that he gave a blanket title of *Highlife Unadulterated*.

The dividends of these efforts were many: Manuel Mavis, the Akara-Ugo Super Star recorded impressive Highlife albums that one might mistake for Oliver De Coque. Lawrence Obusi, the Locomotion, has made powerful statements through his Highlife works that excite a vista of Celestine Ukwu and Goddy Ezike. And a once minstrel, Emeka Morocco Maduka, joined the Highlife family for good. The majority of the gospel praise albums in Nigeria today are all pastiches of Highlife music (Emielu & Dokor, 2019).

At the end of the day, there emerged the Highlife music that blended aspects of African, European, American, Asian, and Middle-Eastern musical traditions. The variants evolved include *Higherlife*, *Hip-life*, *High-pop*, *Gbedu*, *Africalypso*, *Panlogo* (a corruption of *kpanlogo*, a Ga word of Accra, Ghana), and others which tend to craft rock- and jazz-oriented ambient sounds with global appeal while still retaining their indigenous Highlife flavour. The exponents of the new variants are

numerous. They include Sonny Okosun, Tony Grey, William Onyeabor, Christy Essien-Igbokwe, Onyeka Onwenu, Bongos Ikwue, Pat Finn, Tony Okoroji, Arinze Ejiogor, Emma Ogosi, and Jonel Cross. Others are Veno Marioghae-Mbanefo, Charley Boy, Wura Fadaka, Sunny Neji, Zubi Enebeli, Seyi Sholagbade, Kola Ogunkoya, and Lagbaja.

The Era of Dancing in the Sun

At the inception of the Era of Dancing in the Sun, an era marked by a general explosion of native emotions, concerned Nigerians saw the need for the revival of the vintage Highlife popular music of Nigeria. While some artistes, including E. C. Arinze, Bayo Martins, Victor Olaiya, Fatai Rolling Dollar, Jimi Solanke, Lari Williams, Osita Osadebe, Segun Sofowote, Raphael Amarabem, David Bull, Sunny Brown, Nelly Uchendu, Y. S. Akinibosun, and Tunde Osofisan, sought to preserve the traditional sound and style of Highlife music, appealing to older generations and those interested in the nostalgia of the genre; two Nigerian art journalists and newspaper columnists, Benson Idonije and Jahman Anikulapo initiated the revival campaign in 1999. Idonije was worried that for forty years after Nigeria's political independence, rather than counting the gains, Nigerians were busy providing apologies for the neglect of Highlife music. "Rather than relish in the vibrancy of its revitalization for an international breakthrough, we are merely crying for its revival" (Idonije 2000b, p.35).

Since the first decade of the present millennium, there has been a

sporadic explosion of Nigerian artistes who have not only proved their mastery of the art of Highlife music, but have also succeeded in fusing the genre with other musical styles such as hip-hop, Afrobeat, and reggae. This fusion has resulted in the emergence of new sub-genres like highlife-pop and highlife-hip hop, which appeal to a younger audience. These Nigerian neo-highlife musicians have collaborated with international artistes, both within Africa and globally (Adedeji, 2017). These collaborations have helped to expose highlife music to a wider audience and have contributed to its global recognition. Mostly drawn from cross-over performers, the artistes include Flavour, Wizboyy, J. Martins, Wiz Kid, Mister Incredible, Timaya, Terry G, Duncan Mighty, Omawunmi, P-Square, Don Jazzy, Tiwa Savage, Iyanya, Davido, Wande Coal, Eldee, Ransom, Phyno, Sound Sultan, MC Galaxy, Selebobo, Chidinma, Yemi Alade, Simi, Tekno, Adekunle Gold, Chike, Kizz Daniel, Umu Obiligbo, and Professor Onye Egwu. By this unique hybridization and cross-currents, these artistes have expanded the listenership of Highlife music to accommodate all ages and all classes of people.

Nature and Features of Highlife Music *Tonality*

The tonal centre of Highlife music is usually based on the key sense of the Western diatonic major or major scale. This assertion suffices for the entire instrumental accompaniment to the vocal melodies of the music. Rarely is there any modulation or transitions—except in contemporary stylistic

sophistication where modern Highlife music explores the possibilities of modulations and transitions borrowed from Afro-American Jazz music. For instance, the tonal modulation from 'G' to 'A' in Onyeka Onwenu's contemporary Highlife tune, *Iyogogo*. However, the vocal melodies of Highlife music are often based on the modes of five to seven notes. This does not deny the use of the Western diatonic scale as well. When a modal melody is sung over a diatonic scale, the tonal centre will then be traced to the note of the highest frequency of occurrence in the melody, which often contains the note of the greatest durational value in the piece.

Rhythm

The movement of Highlife music through time happens in patterns of lengths of tunes in a group of notes of various durational values. The metre is composed in groupings of simple quadruple time of 4^4 or its compound equivalent of 12_8 , and also in compound duple of 6_8 . A simple triple time of 3_4 is a rarity in Highlife music. Accentuation of strong and weak beats on each group of notes is a little concealed by the consortium of sounds produced by various instruments that constitute the band; rather, the pulse is ascertained through the guide of the time referent often assigned to the claves. The short melodic phrases, which are extended by repetitions and extemporization often lead to sentences and sections in the music. This practice often drives the music to acceleration in tempo, creating a rhythm that changes at a stage from 4_4 to 6_8 or 12_8 .

Highlife rhythm also has conversational attributes, whereby a lively exchange of riffs is witnessed between two instruments of different timbres. In addition, a system of hocketing is at times practiced between the trap drums and the conga drums. In all these instrumental exchanges, individual instruments explore additive rhythms freely, and syncopations are allowed even in the bass drum. Sometimes, the bass guitar holds a swing-like bass line known as walking bass. This is a consistent undulating pulse that underlies and supports the entire piece of music. It is all this variety of rhythm and cross-rhythm that Highlife music employs to cancel out what would have been boredom presented by repetitive arpeggios, riffs, and simultaneous plucking of two notes on the guitar (known as double-shooting).

Melodic Structure

A peculiar nature of highlife melody is its cascading movement from the notes of high pitches to those of low pitches. This pater-genial relay of notes from top to bottom is one of the traditional elements that this pop genre has retained. In addition, there also exist melodies that move in undulating steps till they taper at the lower pitches. Other Highlife melodies also take the shape of an arch, but the cascading melodies predominate. In modern times, contemporary Highlife melodies are influenced by the sinuous melodies of the Arabs. They run tunefully into snake-like patterns against the steady beat of the Highlife rhythm in the background.

Tempo

Highlife music is dance music, and being dance music, the tempo should not be too slow; otherwise, the Highlifers will complain of boredom on the dance floor. A Highlife tempo of 90 crochet beats per minute is considered a slow tempo which could be regarded as an overture—leading to a quicker tempo that is expected to get the dancers on the dance floor. This quick tempo in Highlife is a retention of the so-called ‘HOT’ rhythm in African music.

Texture

By all considerations, the texture of Highlife music is dense. The accompanying instruments combine to create a musical fabric that is compact with harmonic combinations of instrumental tones and timbre. The vocal lines, composed of simple melodies, are arranged in polyphonic tunes in call and response style; with the responding chorus in parallel thirds and sixths.

Intensity

Since Highlife is dance music, the sound is generally loud. The dynamics are left at the discretion of the lead singer who, through exclamations and gesticulations, manipulates the intensity and velocity. The drummer regulates the rest of the instruments, as he gets cues from the lead singer.

Form

The structural design of Highlife in most cases is binary. This design is created not so much in tonality as in rhythm. The transition from simple duple (or quadruple) metre to

compound is often preceded by a solo virtuosic display of trap drums, supported by the congas.

Text and Languages

Highlife songs are generally sung in various vernaculars—Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Kalabari, Efik, and Idoma, etc. Equally popular is the use of Pidgin-English, or rather called All-man language in certain quarters in Nigeria. A few other Highlife songs are rendered in the English language—like Ifeanyi Ordor’s *Back to Highlife*, and E. C. Arinze’s *Time for Highlife*. There is a conscious adherence to the correlation between ethnic languages and pitch in Highlife melodies. This is largely because African languages are tonal.

Instruments/instrumentation

The musical instruments that make the Highlife music are many. They include the human voice, guitars, bass guitar (initially double bass), trap drums, congas, percussions, woodwinds, brass, and keyboards. In dividing the instruments into sections, the Rhythm section consists of guitars, bass guitar, drums, congas, bongo, and other percussion instruments. The Reed section has two altos and one tenor saxophone, while the Brass section features one or two trumpets and one trombone. The vocal section is constituted of three singers—two tenors and one bass. They mark a standard Highlife instrumentation and instruments line up.

Performance Occasions and Staging

All forms of social gatherings provide an enabling environment for the

performance of Highlife music. They include society parties, personal parties of all sorts, and various ceremonies involving individuals, communities, clubs, and establishments. Launchings and sales promotions of all types are equally patrons of highlife music and bands. In addition show promoters also take Highlife bands on performance tours from place to place—performing in big hotels, civic centres, and other spots where gate-taking is charged to the audience.

A standard Highlife stage will present in front men the vocalists, the hornsmen, and sometimes a lead guitarist—who may also double as the lead singer. Other guitarists and the bass will line behind the front men—with the keyboard set at the left or right extreme of this row. The trap drums, the congas, the bongo, and other percussions bring up the rear of the stage. The stage could be an erected podium or a flat one—sometimes with a backdrop advertising the band.

Conclusion

The historical and socioeconomic factors that influenced the development of Highlife music in Nigeria include colonialism, independence movements, and socioeconomic struggles. During the colonial era, Nigeria was under British rule, which influenced the country's music scene. Western instruments, such as guitars, brass instruments, and pianos, were introduced, merging with traditional African percussion instruments to create a unique sound. This fusion of traditional African rhythms and Western musical influences gave birth to

Highlife music. Socioeconomic factors also played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of Highlife music in Nigeria. Nigeria's post-colonial history has been marked by social and economic challenges, including rapid urbanization, rural-urban migration, and economic inequality. Highlife music served as an expression of these experiences, providing a platform for artists to highlight the struggles, aspirations, and dreams of the Nigerian people. The lyrics of Highlife songs addressed themes such as love, politics, hardship, and cultural identity, resonating with audiences across the country. Highlife music became not just a form of entertainment but a cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in the fabric of Nigerian society. It became a vehicle for social commentary, a means to celebrate cultural heritage, and a medium to bridge societal divides.

Nigerian Highlife music experienced several stylistic developments between the 1950s and 2000s. Hereunder is a brief presentation of the notable styles and exponents, within the eras of their evolution:

The Era of Festivals

Styles: *Native Blues, Guitar Bands, Dance Bands*

Exponents: G.T. Onwuka, Okonkwo Adigwe, Benjamin Kokoro Aduronmu, Ojoge Daniel, Irewole Denge, and Israel Nwoba Njemanze; Bobby Benson, Soji Lijadu, Lord Edison, Effiom Brass, New Bethel School Brass, and Ikot Ekan Brass Bands; Bobby Benson and the Jam Session Orchestra, Sam Akpabot and the All Stars, Eddie Okonta and the Jifabro Aces, Stephen Amechi and the Rhythm

Skies, Chris Ajilo and the Cubanos, Bala Miller and the Harbours, Bill Friday and the Ambassadors, Eric Onugha and the Ericos, and E.C. Arinze and the Empire Rhythm Orchestra, Charles Iwegbue and the Archebogs, Atomic Seven of Aba, Roy Chicago and the Rhythm Dandies, and Emperor Erasmus Januwari.

The Era of Masquerades 1

Styles: *Highlife, Juju, Afrobeat, Akwete, Meringue*

Exponents: Bobby Benson, Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson, Dan Satch Joseph, Satche Ayo, Eddy Okonta, and Zeb Philips; E. C. Arinze, Eric Onugha, Victor Olaiya, Roy Chicago, Adeolu Akinsanya, Charles Iwegbue, Stephen Amechi, Zeal Onyia, King Kenny Tone, Fatai Rolling Dollar, Orlando Julius, Inyang Henshaw, and the Koola Lobitos; Tunde King, Ayinde Bakare, Tunde Nightingale, J. Oyeshiku, I.K. Dairo, Ebenezer Obey, and King Sunny Ade; Julius Araba, Fela Ransome Kuti, Sir Victor Uwaifo, Stephen Osita Osadebe, Mike Ejeagha, Saint Augustine, and Herbart Udemba.

The Era of Masquerades 2

Styles: *Vintage Highlife, Ikwokirikwo, Ogene, African Sound, Higherlife, Gbedu, Africalypso*

Exponents: Chief Stephen Osita Osadebe, Raphael Amarabem, Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson, Dr. Victor Olaiya, Baby-face Paul, Celestine Ukwu, Paulson Kalu, Mike Ejeagha, David Bull, Sunny Brown, Muddy Ibe, Goddy Ezike, Oliver De Coque, Prince Nico Mbarga, Ali Chukwuma, Ikenga Super Stars, and Ifeanyi Ordor; Peacocks,

Oriental Brothers, Ikenga Superstars, Joe Nez, Bright Chimezie, and Ken Nwofor, and Manuel Mavis; Sonny Okosun, Tony Grey, William Onyeabor, Christy Essien-Igbokwe, Onyeka Onwenu, Bongos Ikwue, Pat Finn, Tony Okoroji, Arinze Ejiofor, Emma Ogosi, and Jonel Cross. Others are Venio Marioghae-Mbanefo, Charley Boy, Wura Fadaka, Sunny Neji, Zubi Enebeli, Seyi Sholagbade, Kola Ogunkoya, and Lagbaja.

The Era of Dancing in the Sun

Styles: *Hip-life, High-pop*

Exponents: Flavour, Wizboyy, J. Martins, Wiz Kid, Mister Incredible, Timaya, Terry G, Duncan Mighty, Omawunmi, P-Square, Don Jazzy, Tiwa Savage, Iyanya, Davido, Wande Coal, Eldee, Ransom, Phyno, Sound Sultan, MC Galaxy, Selebobo, Chidinma, Yemi Alade, Simi, Tekno, Adekunle Gold, Chike, Kizz Daniel, Umu Obiligbo, and Professor Onye Egwu.

Conclusively, the stylistic developments of Nigerian Highlife music between the 20th and 21st centuries reflect the genre's ability to adapt and incorporate various musical influences while still maintaining its distinctive African identity.

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