**Situating the Nigerian Highlife Music: A Historical-Socioeconomic Perspective**

**Abstract**

That there is a controversy over the origin of Highlife, the authentic traditional popular music of Africa—nay Western coast, is not contestable. Rather, what is contestable is the credibility of the claims by Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria of each being the originator of this unique music genre. These claims are based on the existence of antecedents of Highlife music, which were prevalent in these countries at almost the same period of the 1930s.

 Ever since the controversy over the origin of Highlife has been raving, there has been an influx of assumptions, opinions, and facts from historians whose contributions lie in scratches and parchments, scattered here and there in periodicals. Even at that, the materials are seasoned with sectional sentiments. Leaning heavily on the historical-descriptive research design, this study aims at contributing a homemade, credible, and formal historical documentation of the Highlife music of Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Popular music, Highlife, Nigeria, Historical antecedents, Eras

**Introduction**

As Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone advance their claims of ‘originator’ of the Highlife music, there is yet another phenomenon about origination to be considered. What these three contestants may not have considered yet is the cyclic nature of life, which evolves simultaneous epochal trends in distant lands where any form of communication is absent. History records this phenomenon in the period 5,000BC, when ancient civilizations flourished in Egypt (Africa) and China (Asia). Similarly the Mayans, Aztecs, and Incas led the pre-Colombian Latin America to a prosperous civilization in 2,000 BC, the same era when the Cretes and the Hellenes led Greece to the peak of her civilization. Phoenicia as well was at the crest of her civilization in the same 2,000 BC.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is therefore possible that the early Highlife seed may have sprouted in Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone at the same period in history, hence giving rise to the contention.

**Historical Background**

The terminal historical antecedents of Nigeria as a nation, which reflects the politico-socioeconomic inflections, can be appreciated in three divisions. These divisions identify “the undulating phases that have marked the nation’s checkered epochs”. They include the pre- and post-independent (up to the first republic) period of 1930-1967, the period Pascal G. Dozie has tagged the Era of Festivals; the period between 1968-1998, described as the Era of Masquerades; and finally, the period from May 29, 1999 to the beginning of the present millennium, delineated as the Era of Dancing in the Sun.

The Era of Festivals was characterized by relative policy stability, incremental economic growth, good external image, and a healthy competition. “Simply put, we were building a great nation based on traditional institutions and practices that have typically been successful elsewhere”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 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 a colonial rule. This was immediately followed up by the formation, in 1931, of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) 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.[[3]](#footnote-3) It was around this year that Highlife music sprouted as Nigeria’s indigenous popular music. From this point on, the waxing scale of Highlife—along with other facets of the nation’s historical-socioeconomic life—remained in the ascendant till it climaxed in 1967.

The pogrom in the North and the reprisals in the South resulted in the civil war, which introduced the era of Masquerades. It really became an era of masquerading in inter-ethnic relationships in a nation of ‘one people, one destiny’. The economist, Dozie, notes that:

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.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This period (1968–1998) saw a nation that was highly vulnerable to all forms of foreign incursions. Alien commodities—which included music—were pushed on the people through various media of the contemporary communication super-highway. It was so terrible that some community leaders accepted foreign currency to play hosts to toxic wastes.

 Onyeka Onwenu 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.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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 revival of cultural values.

 The crucial stance of this era provided a rare opportunity for serious introspection and a return to foundation principles of the nation’s ethos.

**The Era of Festivals**

Nigeria, bordered on the north by Niger Republic, east by Chad and Cameroon, south by the Gulf of Guinea, and west by Benin Republic, became a source of attraction to Portuguese slave merchants, who, in the 14th century invaded the north through the assistance of Muslim Arab raiders from the Sahara regions. This contact with Middle-Eastern and Western European cultures started a cultural miscegenation that was to be amplified by other attractions.

By the beginning of the 17th century, the discovery of such natural resources as iron-ore, salt, coal, lead, zinc, gold, uranium, petroleum, and natural gas in Nigeria attracted more Portuguese and British colonialists. Buah[[6]](#footnote-6) tells us that these Portuguese opened the doors of West Africa to the Spanish settlers in America; thereby exposing the black people of Africa to a deeper foreign influence, culture-wise.

The Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century, the abolition of slave trade in 1807, and America’s acceptance to back off the obnoxious business in 1864 all made Black freedom in the White lands obvious. A bold campaign for repatriation had been on since the tail end of the 18th century; hence so many freed Black slaves were transported back to African—mostly to Freetown, Sierra Leone and Lagos, Nigeria. This gesture further compounded the case of cultural confluences along the west coast of Africa.

On the heels of this industrial revolution also came other revolutions. A notable one was the emergence of a world popular culture, which inaugurated a musical diversification in the late 19th century. The dramatic transformations—especially urbanization and industrialization—brought about changes that “disrupted traditional attitudes, lifestyles, and forms of artistic patronage, while creating new urban social classes with new musical tastes”.

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 Nigerian and the world at large.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Drawing heavily on these historical-socioeconomic associations on ground, Nigeria started witnessing various foreign musical cultures in the 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[[8]](#footnote-8) reports that the same process was tenable in Ghana, while Akpabot[[9]](#footnote-9) praises the Protestant Movements for their liberality that gave room to acculturation—as opposed to the rigidity of Roman Catholicism.

Before the end of the 1800s, Nigeria was already used to the European colonial ballroom dances; Akpabot lists them as waltz, foxtrot, quickstep and tango. The freed slaves also returned with rhumba, conga, son Afro-Cubano, mambo, meringue, and cha-cha-cha dances of Latin America.

On importation of foreign musical culture to Nigeria, Martins 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 the music that came to be known as Highlife.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Through the indigenous entertainment music borne out of traditional concert parties, Nigeria responded sporadically but unanimously to a musical revolution, which Akpabot describes as “a deliberate protest against Western popular dance music which thrived in the country during the colonial era”.[[11]](#footnote-11) Each of these concert parties 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 a neo-folk dance music which

Bucknor (as cited in Collins, 1996) identifies as *kokoma* and *agidigbo*. By the year 1930, Hubert Ogunde (the father of Nigerian theatre) had already 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*.

Northern region, not given so much to concert parties, made their 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*.[[12]](#footnote-12) 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.

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.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Soon after the Native Blues stabilized, Combo Bands emerged as an indigenous version of the then reigning Brass Bands of the European colonialists.

Okoro 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.[[14]](#footnote-14)

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 added, as well as one trumpet and/or one saxophone. According to Idonije,

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.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The tail 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 Band. Most of these bands actually grew out of the Combo bands and Dane 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 back-up singers who sang in three harmonic parts—with other instrumentalists doubling as back-up singers—to produce a dense harmonic texture in the vocals.

These bands artistically packaged and performed rich indigenous melodies through the media of swing, jazz, and twist.

Akpabot describes these styles as the acculturated music that leaned towards playing of 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.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Bobby Benson and his Jam Session Orchestra remained at the top of the list of the professionals of this new development. Others 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 E.C. Arinze. Of equal prominence were Charles Iwegbue and the Archebogs, Atomic Seven of Aba, Roy Chicago and the Rhythm Dandies, and Erasmus Januwari.

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 different from what the Nigerian dance bands were already playing—indigenous folklores 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.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Lari Williams 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 was to break away from the Bobby Benson Jam Session to form his Cool Cats Band that embraced the name. Prior to the declaration of independence from colonial rule in 1960, so 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 resident at Travellers’ Lodge, Aba; and the Paradise Rhythm Dance Orchestra was based in Calabar. In the northern part of the country, Satche Ayo and the Sahara All Stars Band based in Jos; while Ibadan harboured Eddy Okonta and the Jofab Star Aces, Zeb Philips and the Blue Nine, amongst others.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Lagos was the hot spot, and all the big names had their regular joints 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.

Highlife music so ruled the airwaves that at the time of Independence in 1960, it was enjoying a widespread and profound acceptance. This musical style, according to Idonije, “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”.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Victor Olaiya and his All Stars Orchestra who mounted the dais on the 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.[[20]](#footnote-20)

By the year 1967, it became almost impossible to keep track of 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 round. 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 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.[[21]](#footnote-21)

These companies made available to Nigeria the variant forms of recorded Highlife music of neighbouring nations of Africa. 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 variants included *Benga/Taarab* of Kenya, *Chimurenga* and *Jiti* of Zimbabwe, and South Africa’s *Marabi/Mbaquanga*.[[22]](#footnote-22)

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 was 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 rich urban class could not go without the presence of some live musical performances. This class was particular about flamboyancy and copious display of wealth. The occasion could be 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[[23]](#footnote-23) recalls that Baba Tunde King is credited with the coining of the term, *Juju Music* to address the *Owambe* variant of Highlife music which 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 took the genre to 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 back-up vocalists.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Julius O. Araba initiated the journey towards 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 own 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.[[25]](#footnote-25)

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 the mid-western Nigeria, the Edo born Victor Uwaifo explored the rich musical culture of Bini to create his own 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*.[[26]](#footnote-26)

In the 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 till 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 really 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.

**The Era of Masquerades**

The first major setback experienced by Highlife came in 1967 with the Nigerian civil war, which lasted until 1970. Idonije 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.[[27]](#footnote-27)

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 sojourned to Maiduguri where he formed the African Band with some of his friends. He waited for three months before moving 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, while the Nigerian society was in a flux. This situation led to other up-coming musicians exploring other forms of popular music, so as to sound different and attract commercial investors. These new forms include Afro-rock, Afro-calypso, Afro-reggae, and Afro-funk. The exponents were many; including 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 Wrinkers Experience, Doves, Founders 15, and Semi-Colon also ruled the airwaves. However, the embers of Highlife were kept aflame by Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson, Eddy Okwedi, Celestine Ukwu, Stephen Osita Osadebe, and Mike Ejeagha whose insistence led to the formation of yet other new and vibrant bands.

The creative rationalizations and modifications that were later introduced to the 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 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. Some Highlife ‘faithfuls’ 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 faithfuls 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. And the new entrants included Oriental Brothers, Muddy Ibe, Goddy Ezike, Oliver De Coque, Prince Nico Mbarga, Ali Chukwuma, Ikenga Super Stars, and Ifeanyi Ordor.

Since the craze for Afro-rock could not hold for up to a decade, the rock bands soon disbanded as they got tired of the fad. This explains why there was witnessed an influx into the Highlife scene 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 a powerful acrobatic guitar styles and fast tempo of the Congolese *Liquour-Liquour*. Ikenga Super Stars explored the *Liquour-Liquour* and *soukous* dance rhythms of the Congo, but it was the simple but beautiful delivery of *Sweet Mother* by Prince Nico Mbarga in 1976 that really 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 was too juicy to be ignored by aspiring musicians. In 1982, Ifeanyi Ordor—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—GoddyOku, is sung in English language throughout. The idea was to make the message of the lyrics available to all audience. This call got a backing in 1990 when Oliver De Coque declared a war of Highlife music. Oliver, who coincidentally has a striking physical resemblance with Ifeanyi Ordor, pursued this war headlong with the release of his album, *Musik Africa*. Ever since then, it has been a consistent release of albums through the years. He even experimented on hip-hop rap in *Social Man* hit song as a bait to catch the interest of the youth in Highlife. Also making his contributions in 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, has joined the Highlife family for good. The majority of the gospel praise albums in Nigeria today are all pastiches of Highlife music.

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*, 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 Okosuns, Tony Grey, William Onyeabor, Christy Essien-Igbokwe, Onyeka Onwenu, Bongos Ikwue, Pat Finn, Tony Okoroji, Arinze Ejiofor, Emma Ogosi, and Jonel Cross. Others are Veno Marioghe-Mbanefo, Charley Boy, Wuru Fadaka, Sunny Neji, Zubi Enebeli, Seyi Sholagbade, Kola Ogunkoya, and Lagbaja.

**The Era of Dancing in the Sun**

At the inception of Nigeria’s Era of Dancing in the Sun, an era marked by a general explosion of native emotions, two concerned Nigerians saw the need for the revival of the authentic traditional popular music of Africa in Nigeria. Benson Idonije and Jahman Anikulapo initiated this revival campaign on December 11, 1999. Idonije was worried that for forty years after the 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 international breakthrough, we are merely crying for its revival”.[[28]](#footnote-28)

The revival campaign operated under the name of the Great Highlife Party (a.k.a. Elders’ Forum) and organized weekly Highlife gigs at O’Jez Club, Yaba, Lagos; the same locality where E.C. Arinze and his contemporaries occupied to develop the genre. The campaign attracted more crusaders, especially the Highlifers of the ‘old school’ cadre as well as the youth. Some of the crusaders included E.C. Arinze, Bayo Martins, Victor Olaiya, Fatai Rolling Dollar, Jimi Solanke, Lari Willams, Osita Osadebe, Segun Sofawote, Raphael Amarabem, and David Bull. Others were Sunny Brown, Nelly Uchendu, Y.S. Akinibosun, Tunde Osofisan, O’Jez Club, Orlando Julius, and Alabi Pedro. Representing the electronic media were Peter Igho of NTA, Ezike Amadi of ESBS, Enugu, Effiom Archibong (a.k.a. The Master) and Ladi Gbulie of Radio Nigeria, Enugu, Chris Agu and Mahmoud Musa of Radio Nigeria Kaduna, and Ilemi Okoka of Metro FM, Lagos.

About the Great Highlife Party, Idonije notes:

It was thought that this theory would work in practical terms since some elders still love to go out and have fun, listening and perhaps dancing to what is referred to as ‘old school’. But experience has since shown that the youths that the Elders’ Forum tag appears to have excluded, have always constituted the bulk of attendance at the forum.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The step into the revival of Nigerian Highlife music was initiated by Renate Albertson-Marton, who attracted the sponsorship of the Goethe Institute. This step led to the attraction and involvement of other sponsors. Among them were the French Cultural Centre, Benson & Hedges, Nigeria Breweries, Guinness Nigeria, Rothmans, and the Rivers State Government, under Governor Peter Odili. Premier Music, through their re-issuing of the great Highlife hits of the past, also played a prominent role in championing the course of the revival campaign. Next to Premier Music was Nira Music Ventures. These two companies made it possible for researchers and composers to have access to Highlife music of all eras.

All these efforts were not without positive results. Tayo Solagbade, the managing director of TS3 Music Consultants, Lagos, on the Children’s Day Celebration of May, 2003 put the children through series of rehearsals that led to the live performance of various styles of Highlife music. According to Solagbade, the purpose was to introduce Highlife music to children at a tender age. “Highlife music is dying gradually and we must not allow it to die a natural death. It is our duty to let the children know this genre of music and also appreciate its richness”.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The first decade of the present millennium has been greeted with a sporadic explosion of Nigerian artistes who have not only proved their mastery of the art of the Highlife music, but have also succeeded in fusing the genre with other musical styles, especially the hip-hop. Mostly drawn from the 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, and YemiAlade. 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.

**Conclusion**

To trace the origin of Nigerian Highlife music, one has to understand the historical-socioeconomic environment that gave birth to the syncretic urban neo-folk dance music in the early 1930s. The colonial extortions, the social segregation based on race and class, the status symbols ascribed by economic power, and the need for leisure and entertainment were all phenomenal contributors to the initiation of the new form of music. The development from Neo-folk dance to Native Blues, and then to Highlife music played by Combos, Guitars, or Dance bands are all part of the activities that marked the Era of Festivals—1930 to 1967. The threat to the continuity of the music came after 1967, when the vagaries of the civil war opened the borders of Nigeria to an influx of foreign music. But the threat turned out to be a mere truce, as the country’s return to democracy in May, 1999 ushered in national sentiments that favoured indigenization. This marked the end of the Era of Masquerades, and the beginning of the Era of Dancing in the sun. Contemporary forms that came in various guises and under different names were mere fusions whose roots could be traced back to the very traditional Highlife music of old.

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2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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4. Dozie, *ibid.*

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