

NIGERIAN HIGHLIFE MUSIC: A SURVEY OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL EVENTS FROM 1950-2005

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Abstract

Highlife is a popular music genre that crept into Nigeria in the nineteenth century and has since attained permanent recognition among Nigerian music types. Some scholars have carried out research on Nigerian popular music and highlife in particular, focusing on its evolution and classification. This notwithstanding, the number of researches carried out in highlife is still insignificant in comparison to other areas of music, even though its place in Nigerian history is incontestable given its social, political and economic significance during the struggle for independence and the period of the Nigerian civil war. Although highlife music is still performed in Nigeria today, several socio-political events have influenced its practice. The main objective of this article, therefore, is to discuss highlife, highlighting some events that unfolded in the socio-political space between 1950 and 2005, with a view to bringing to the fore, effects of such on highlife music and musicians during the period under study. In eliciting information, the writer consulted some existing literature on highlife music, listened to albums of progenitors of the genre such as Rex Lawson, Victor Uwaifo, Sir Warrior, Nico Marga and others. Findings reveal that socio-political factors, the emergence of new musical styles such as Afrobeat, Juju, Fuji and Hip-hop left a long-lasting imprint on the minds of highlife music enthusiasts, thereby influencing their taste and crave for highlife, and posing a threat to its already established prominence. This article recommends that more studies in the area of popular music (especially highlife) should be undertaken by researchers, and more highlife chairs should be created in departments of music across Nigerian universities.

Keywords : Nigerian highlife music,

Introduction

Nigeria is a heterogeneous and cosmopolitan country, largely cultivated and rooted in a rich cross - cultural tradition, identity, and

multiplicity of ethnic groups and musical cultures that have culminated in making her one of the most musically diverse nations of the world. According to Euba (1977), 'Nigeria is an extensive music area, both in its geography and the variety of musical types'. However, there is the challenge of insignificant researches into her popular music and an in-depth study on the characteristic features, styles, structure, and some areas of the various styles. This observation has since been made by Omibiyi (1981) when she notes that it is compulsory for researchers to 'broaden their scope of study to include all varieties of musical styles current in contemporary Nigeria'. In the same vein, Adegoite (2006) rightly observes that scholarly studies in the area of Nigerian Popular music have not been given adequate attention. It is within this background that this paper seeks to discuss some of the notable events that unfolded in the social and political facets of pre/post-colonial Nigeria, and the effects of same on Highlife music. Even in recent times, Ogisi (2010) asserts that not until the early 1980s, researches into popular music was grossly intangible. Despite the successes recorded in various areas of music scholarship in Nigeria, there is still need for researchers to cover more aspects of popular music that are still deficient in terms of scholarly output. These remarks, no doubt clamour for rigorous study of Highlife from diverse viewpoints so as to unravel its essence.

### Highlife Music in Nigeria

Highlife is one of the oldest popular music styles in Nigeria. Amidst its prominence lied mixed reactions in its general acceptability. For instance, people have viewed highlife as music meant for drunkards and never - do - wells in society. According to Olatunbosun (2012), highlife music is very celebrative in nature, sometimes leaving the imagery of alcohol and nightlife on its listeners. Supporting this view, Okafor (2005) elucidates on why it was initially unpopular. He notes that:

Popular music artistes were influenced by acculturation, and by the reason of that, exhibited traits unacceptable to the indigenous culture, for the fact that drinks, women, diabolical acts and certain conducts that leave much to be desired were associated with the (highlife) guitarists.

Similarly, Onyeji (2002) believes the pop musician is lowly rated because of their loose and irresponsible lifestyle. According to him, the impression is as a result of earlier entrants to pop music not

acquiring formal education, indulging in questionable moral behaviours such as drinking, prostitution, drugs and radicalism. Agawu (2003) also critiques the impressions of viewing highlife musicians as rascals. However, these divergent views on highlife music and musicians changed with the clamour for independence in the 1950s, and later its actualization in 1960. There is no doubt that the attainment of independence in 1960 brought about many social and religious changes that are still palpable till today. Ogisi (2008), rightly notes that 'just as the 1950s is significant in Nigerian music, it is even more so in respect of its history, as the period preceding independence was characterized by immense social changes some of which impacted on popular music'. Highlife music at the time was gradually gaining prominence among the Igbo, and not only did the peculiar style of the music turn out to be a thing of national significance and acceptance, it became one of the most famous contemporary musical types that originated in Nigeria. Worthy of note also, is that highlife music had existed long before independence, but it was during the period it achieved national recognition.

According to Randel (1986), highlife became prominent among West African countries in the 1930s, while Emielu (2009) opines that it became a 'recognized musical style' in the 1950s. According to Omojola (1995) and Roberts in Ogisi (2004), highlife is a generic label which encapsulates music of various ethnic groups. According to Aluede (1997), highlife is 'a hybrid of Western and African musical ideas'. From a broader point of view, Collins in Aluede (1997) believes 'highlife music arose from the merging of traditional African dance music with foreign influences like sea shanties, regimental band music and Christian hymns'. In the opinion of Euba (1977:10) 'classical highlife orchestra is essentially the same as the Western dance band of the 1950s, except that the Yoruba tension drum is sometimes added... highlife songs are mostly in Pidgin English; this musical type reached its peak of popularity in the years preceding and following 1960...' In another vein, Ogisi (2004) and Emielu (2009) also believe that the name was coined from the recreational music of ethnic groups such as Kokomba, Adaha, gombe, Ashiko, nyomkro, paika, kpanlogo. Highlife according to Nzewi (1985) is a 'Nigerian modern entertainment art' which does not bear resemblance with any ethnic group, and cannot be entirely referred to as Nigerian since it is widely performed and has become a 'national pop' music and dance of African countries like Ghana. This however, may not be entirely true, since recent studies (Onyeji, 2002; Ogisi, 2004; Emielu, 2009; Matczynski, 2011) have pointed to the ethnic and regional identities of highlife.

It can therefore be summarized that highlife is an amalgam of the popular music form and traditional melodies and rhythms with some Western musical features. Many scholars who have written on this area submit that it is one of the most popular musical genres among the West African region, and its roots and origin can be traced to Ghana. Although it had existed in other forms, it is believed by some researchers to have started in Ghana around the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the term 'highlife' was coined and later came to Nigeria in 1920. Onyeji (2002), remarks that: 'The origin of highlife dates to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on the Fanti Coast when the ports became melting pots of musical influences including the music of local fishermen and farmers, of immigrant ethnic groups, of European sailors, black sailors'. Ogisi (2004) however sees it in a somewhat different way. For him, the origin of highlife music does not really matter. He affirms that 'whether highlife originated from Ghana or it is indigenous to Nigeria, the fact remains that its roots are in the traditional entertainment music of the various ethnic groups across southern Nigeria and was deplored as street dance music beginning in the 1880s at the instance of the carnivals of the Brazilian/Cuban émigré'. This means highlife had existed in other forms before the name was coined. According to Olatunbosun (2012), 'history ties highlife music to slave trade.

Regardless of what history books say about the origin of highlife music, some African raw materials for its musical instruments such as kongoma (thumb piano), bamboo flute, string instruments, drums were in existence in the traditional African society before expatriate former slaves from the United States and England brought western music elements that made up the fusion called highlife music'. Okafor (2005) further asserts that highlife 'grew out of the brass band which transported the themes and rhythms of local music into the urban dance hall setting'. Highlife has also been identified by Nzewi (1985) as a 'truly national music of Nigeria..'. Despite highlife being one of the earliest popular music styles in West Africa, and it being initially regarded as popular music meant for the elite, it has in recent times been placed at the periphery among contemporary music styles. However, on the contrary, highlife holds a vital place in the country's history especially the role it played in the 1950s, during Nigeria's quest for independence. Highlife is strongly tied to the musical traditions and cultures of Nigeria. The social and cultural influences on the music are the foundations on which some highlife musicians built their music especially in terms of the structure and text of the songs. Sharing this view, Matczynski (2011) believes 'highlife constitutes not a simplification of traditional music, but rather a creative reorganization and re-contextualization of tradition'.

## Some Highlife Musicians and their Bands

In the early 1950s, Ghanaian highlife gained enormous popularity in the eastern region of Nigeria. According to Ekwueme (n.d), the legendary Ghanaian, Emmanuel Tettey Mensah who is undoubtedly the most famous highlife musician of the 1950s, 'was one of the earliest to make an international impact with highlife'. Similarly, Aluede (1997) states that 'a serious innovative work towards proper Africanization of highlife music was done by E. T. Mensah and his tempo dance band that toured West Africa in the fifties and sixties'. He frequently visited eastern Nigeria for musical performances thereby attracting followership from teeming fans. His band, 'The Tempo's which he started leading in 1947 held several performances in West Africa at the time, one of the highlights being a performance with the world renowned trumpeter and jazz player, Louis Armstrong in 1956. Bobby Benson's band became the first Nigerian highlife band to hold serious musical performances in Nigeria. He grew to be one of the most popular highlife musicians of his time after releasing albums like 'Taxi Driver', 'Gentleman Bobby', and 'Nylon Dress'. His contributions to the development of highlife transcend his albums.

It is worthy of note that big wigs like Sir Victor Uwaifo and Victor Olaiya were not only members of his band, they received their training in the band, culminating in their development into versatile highlife musicians, and legends of the style. In the view of Onibiyi (1981) this pedigree of apprenticeship with Bobby Benson gave Victor Olaiya a boost. Hence, 'Victor Olaiya was able to play varied highlife rhythms, and in recognition of his contribution to music in Nigeria, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music in Czechoslovakia'. Jim Lawson and the Mayor's Dance Band soon took over and went on to achieve unprecedented fame in the early 1970s, although it was prematurely cut short with the death of Lawson in 1976. Highlife musicians like Nico Mbarga were also making waves. His 'Sweet Mother' became a foremost hit not only in Nigeria but Africa. This is manifested in the over thirteen million copies that were sold.

Furthermore, as a result of the Nigerian civil war that lasted between 1967 and 1970, some Igbo musicians left Lagos and returned to their homeland. This resulted in making highlife music lose its place, and become less recognized as one of the Nigerian music styles, especially in western Nigeria. Several highlife enthusiasts now conceived it to be 'Igbo music', rather than Nigerian. Although there was later a gradual decline on the popularity of highlife among the Igbos, musicians like Victor Olaiya, Sonny Okosun, Osita Osadebe and Victor Uwaifo made frantic efforts to sustain the music. Ifionu (1989) has grouped Nigerian music limiting it to the traditional music of the

Igbo. Ogunade (1991) also groups highlife into three categories: The Igbo based, Yoruba based and Igbo based highlife. In this paper, the discussion of factors that have impacted on highlife is in three periods, and has been grouped thus: 1950-1970, 1971-1990, and 1991-2005. The periods were realized as a result of the various socio-economic, religious and political changes that took place during the time, and the major impact these changes left on highlife in Nigeria.

#### The Period, 1950-1970

The era witnessed a tenacious agitation by Nigerians for independence and self-reliance from the stranglehold of colonial rule. The colonial government reached a climax of unpopularity among the Nigerian populace who were willing to explore any mechanism that could lead to freedom. Music became one of the strongest tools for fighting European dominance, and became the loudest voice of the masses. Worthy of note also, is that prior to this era, highlife music was still striving to gain prominence in Nigeria. This was due to the fact that the influence of the Christian missionaries was so adverse that the citizens considered foreign cultures supreme. For instance, majority of Nigerians wore English attires to work, Church, and parties. Foreign blues, jazz and hip-hop were commonly heard in homes, nightclubs and bars. Anything contrary to the above was deemed a deviation from elitist standards, or a departure from 'globally' accepted practice. But soon as Nigerians' consciousness awakened, there was an instant resistance to almost all alienated cultures. There was a deliberate opposition by many Nigerians to Western music, dressing, food, and language with a view to entrenching Nigerian cultural values. Many churches started holding services in local languages rather than English. Some priests and other ardent believers of the Christian faith made efforts to translate the Bible into vernacular, while a number of choirmasters translated the English hymns to the indigenous languages of where such Churches were domiciled. These events had a towering influence on the development of highlife at the time, and changed the face of Nigerian music. There was a seeming shift towards 'our own' rather than 'their own.'

Among other musical genres like *fiiji*, highlife became very popular in the eastern, southern, western and northern parts of the country. Cardinal Rex Lawson was one of the central figures of this period. His music dominated the highlife scene and spanned across ethnic and language barriers; it enjoyed considerable patronage and received significant acceptability when and wherever it was performed. Songs like *Sawale* and *love Adure* are still performed till this day. Another notable name during this era is Bobby Benson. His music was unique because of his superlative creative ability; he successfully fused

Caribbean and jazz musical elements with those of Africa. The 1950s was a period when many musicians who later were to become highlife greats learnt their trades under the tutelage of masters like Benson and Lawson. Sir Victor Uwaifo, Roy Chicago, Victor Olaiya are among those that played alongside Benson. In variance to Fela's Afrobeat that often criticized unpopular governments, corrupt practices, and social injustice, highlife texts are mostly centered on love, and characterized by eulogies and praises, channeled at deserving individuals using the Nigerian Pidgin. It communicated to virtually everybody whether the language was understood or not. Highlife music in the 1950s was closely linked with the culture and traditions of the people, blending Nigerian rhythmic patterns with those adapted from abroad. In the 1960s, guitar highlife bands sprang up from palm-wine music. Lawson's band was a major promoter of this style.

#### The Period, 1971-1990

Following the Nigerian civil war, the period between 1971 and 1990 witnessed an enormous decline in the prominence of highlife music in some parts of the country especially the west. The emergence of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the irrefutable 'god' of Afrobeat, and the Juju style that was growing in popularity at the time took precedence and signaled the dawn of a new era in the popular music scene in Lagos. Around this time, big wigs like James Brown, Stevie Wonder and Manu Dibango visited Fela to hear and examine his approach in the creation of the new style. Sonny Okosun also introduced a new style he called Ozzidi which fuses highlife and reggae. His band was also known as Ozzidi. Apart from English, Sonny Okosun was able to utilize several indigenous languages in his music including Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Eson. Highlife further declined with the advent of the disco invasion in some parts of the country, but continued to flourish and serve therapeutic purposes in the east from where it all began. The civil war which had adverse effects on Nigerians and left many traumatized, paved the way for highlife to become a major source of re-habilitation to the victims of the war, and in the process, gave the assurance of a better Nigeria to the hopeless. Osita Osadebe was virtually the most renowned of this era.

He successfully incorporated Igbo musical elements with samba, waltz and calypso, with commentaries running simultaneously with the music. Although not as antagonistic like Fela Anikulapo Kuti, he used the commentaries to convey personal issues that bothered him. His song Osondi Owendi which was released in 1984 remains one of the most trending records ever to have come out of Nigeria. Others like Celestine Ukwu and the Oriental Brothers International also strived to

sustain the music. The most popular highlife records till date were recorded around the period. In 1976, Prince Mbarga's Sweet Mother sold upwards of thirteen million copies, and won several awards. Half Cameroonian, Mbarga was greatly influenced by Congolese music.

Nigerian highlife musicians of the period played a dominant role in the development of Igbo popular music. Together, common features are evident in their music. With the unambiguous chords of the guitars, soothing melodies, unconventional harmonies, and steady rhythms, they formed a distinct hybrid of highlife. Sir Warrior led this revolution in highlife; his music was void of external influences, yet it was universally accepted. Before he started highlife, he had become famous with Ese music. Perhaps, his versatility, evident in his ability of performing several musical types is responsible for the success he achieved in creating a new brand of highlife. He is widely considered as the one who brought about a definitive style to highlife music. He stylishly combined Igbo vocals with his sublime and dexterous guitar skills. For the first time, the period marked the beginning of recognition and acknowledgement by government. The giving of National Awards to musicians became a normal trend. Sir Victor Uwaifo is one of such that received national recognition. In 1983, he was appointed a Member of the Order of the Niger (MON) and a Justice of the Peace. Uwaifo was again appointed a Commissioner for Arts, Culture, and Tourism in Edo State between 2001 and 2003. He was invited to visit the presidential villa a number of times, a privilege he continues to relish.

#### The Period, 1990 -2005

Some greats of the second period who lived into the 1990s also thrived and had positive influences on the era. Victor Uwaifo's Joromi possibly still stands as the most popular highlife hit of the period. The political scene in Nigeria also witnessed unrest, with perhaps the most unpopular government in Nigeria's history emerging in the period. The death of Fela Anikulapo Kuti was another major event in the period. Highlife lost its ground especially in the southern, western and northern parts of the country. The death of Fela led to the invigoration and birth of new musical styles. For instance, hip-hop not only began to take centre stage in the music industry, it has been ingrained as the most accepted music of contemporary Nigerian youths. Although Western hip-hop had found its way into Nigeria prior to this time, it only became very prominent especially among the youths when Nigerians started practicing it. Many hip-hop musicians like Oladapo Daniel Oyebanjo (Dbanj), Innocent Idibia (2face), Peter Okoye and Paul Okoye (Psquare), and Style Plus sprung up during this time and their music is still growing in fare.

The influence of hip-hop on the youths was so adverse because of the deliberate effort in trying to re-establish the cultures and practices that were once considered weird and bizarre during the struggle for independence. The youths now viewed highlife as 'old-school', and a type of music essentially patronized by people upwards of fifty years. Although musicians like Osayomare Joseph and Adviser Nowamagbe in Edo State have released albums that criticize corruption, social injustice and bad leadership, it could not match the popularity of Fela's Afrobeat and hip-hop. Perhaps, if their music had taken the form of hip-hop it would have enjoyed more patronage. Despite these, highlife still continues to flourish from where it originated. The 1990s through the early 2000s can best be described as a period when highlife went back to its roots. Majority of Nigeria's highlife bands are from the east, although some musicians in the east have struggled to keep it alive.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

Change is part of human nature and this trait has overlapped into even culture and indeed musical culture. Consequently, every phenomenon all over the world is subject to or at least prone to change especially in the face of globalization, technological innovations and societal yearnings. Music itself has been immensely impacted by forces like globalization and several social, political, religious, economic and cultural factors. Idolor (2014) asserts that 'tradition has always been repeatedly reconstructed.. traditional music practices and indeed almost every aspect of life are not what they were a hundred years ago'. This is because 'one can no longer stick rigidly to traditional musical practices without yielding to forces of modernity' (Aluede, 2014). In this paper, we discussed the development of highlife, and underlined some of the events that took place between the period 1950 and 2005, that have influenced its practice and acceptance in society. It also provides an insight into the musical lives of some progenitors of Nigerian highlife music, and some of the techniques employed in their musical performances. One of the chief concerns of Nigerian music scholars should be to preserve and avert the impending extinction of the musical styles that are capable of defining Nigeria's identity. Although highlife music has been on a steady decline in Nigeria given some of the factors noted in this paper, it may not yet be in the category of Nigerian musical typologies facing total extinction. However, one need not wait for that time since 'the decline of highlife with all its potentialities is a sad development in the contemporary music scene', (Okafor, 2005).

Therefore, 'in this process, preservation of positive cultural heritage, of some generally accepted traditional elements which construct cultural identity of a nation is encouraged' (Idolor, 2014). Also, Adeola (2001) in Oikelome (2013) affirms that 'popular music in Nigeria carries with it a national identity, which portrays it as a music that is indigenous to Nigeria. The various uses of language, costume and musical instruments present the very rich Nigerian and social heritage'. Apart from encouragement that can be offered to highlife musicians and their bands, music scholars should not relent in engaging in more active research focusing on different areas of highlife spanning from its inception to present day, and the publication of findings from such research endeavour. Furthermore, departments of music should create chairs for highlife greats. The University of Port Harcourt already has a chair for the highlife music icon, Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson occupied by Professor Onyee Nwankpa and another for one of the founding fathers of Nigerian art music, Ikoli Harcourt Whyte, occupied by Dr. A. K. Achinivu. Other departments of music should strive to broaden their research horizons by delving into researches in the area of highlife and its musicians by establishing such chairs. This will be a means of preserving the music and disseminating same to all and sundry.

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