

EXPLORING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATING INDIGENOUS MUSICAL TRADITIONS IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Oladimeji Adedayo Olajide

Department of Creative Arts (Music Unit),
Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria
ORCID ID: 0009-0000-4243-5991
Email: crowndyoneup@gmail.com

&

Dr Florence Nweke

Department of Creative Arts (Music Unit),
Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria
Email: fnweke@unilag.edu.ng

Abstract

Nigeria's musical heritage, spanning diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities, holds immense cultural, aesthetic, and pedagogical value. Yet within the secondary school music curriculum, these indigenous and syncretic musical traditions remain marginalized in favour of Euro-Western theoretical and performance models. This paper investigates how these traditions can be meaningfully integrated into music education at the secondary school level through an interdisciplinary approach. Using a descriptive-analytical methodology grounded in secondary literature, the study examines core Nigerian music genres and their pedagogical relevance. The findings reveal key challenges including curricular marginalization, limited teacher preparation, resource scarcity, and prevailing biases that privilege Western musical forms over indigenous ones. Despite these constraints, Nigerian music traditions such as Afrobeat, Highlife, Juju, Apala, Fuji, and Gospel offer unique pedagogical strengths in fostering creativity, cultural identity, and community-based learning. The study concludes that an interdisciplinary framework—drawing on musicology, history, cultural studies, and education—provides a viable path for integrating these traditions into secondary school curricula. Strategic reforms in teacher training, curriculum design, and digital preservation are recommended to ensure both educational relevance and the long-term vitality of Nigeria's musical heritage.

Keywords: Nigerian music traditions, interdisciplinary pedagogy, curriculum reform, music education, indigenous knowledge systems

Introduction

Music in Nigeria is not merely entertainment; it is a living archive, a communicative tool, and a cultural compass that guides identity, community life, and historical memory. Across its over 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria boasts a plurality of musical traditions that serve spiritual, social, political, and educational functions (Onyekachukwu & Oghogho, 2018). These range from the Yoruba talking drum to the Islamic-inflected rhythms of Apala and the politically potent fusion of Afrobeat.

Despite their cultural ubiquity, Nigerian music traditions are conspicuously underrepresented in formal education, particularly within secondary school curricula. Music syllabi, shaped by colonial legacies and globalized educational standards, tend to prioritize Western classical music, notation systems, and performance techniques (Adeogun, 2018). Consequently, Nigerian youth often develop fluency in Western musical forms while remaining alienated from their indigenous musical heritage.

This disconnect has far-reaching implications. At a time when digital media facilitates unprecedented access to global music cultures, the diminishing presence of local traditions in formal education may lead to cultural dislocation, weakened identity formation, and the erosion of intangible heritage (Adedjei, 2016). Against this backdrop, the present study argues for a targeted, interdisciplinary strategy to reintegrate Nigerian music traditions into the secondary school curriculum. It proposes a model that synthesizes musicology, anthropology, history, and curriculum theory to foster culturally relevant, pedagogically effective, and socially meaningful music education.

Overview of Nigerian Music Traditions

Nigeria's musical landscape reflects its linguistic and ethnic diversity. Historically rooted in oral and performance traditions, the diverse music practices that embody and express the Nigerian musical traditions are often embedded within religious ceremonies, rites of passage, storytelling, communal festivals, and social critique.

Beyond genre classifications, Nigerian musical traditions are marked by their holistic integration of music, movement, and meaning. Indigenous music often functions as a multidimensional practice where sound is inseparable from dance, drama, ritual, and storytelling (Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023). Performance contexts range from royal courts and village squares to religious shrines and urban stages, highlighting the music's communal orientation and adaptability (Adejube & Ajala, 2024). Instruments such as the talking drum, *udu*, *shekere*, and *agidigbo* are not merely sonic tools but also cultural artefacts that carry linguistic codes and symbolic weight. Unlike Western traditions that rely heavily on notation, Nigerian music is primarily transmitted through oral methods, embodied participation, and apprenticeship, fostering intergenerational learning and emphasizing experiential knowledge (Nzewi, 2023).

Among the most influential of these traditions is Afrobeat, pioneered by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, which fuses Yoruba rhythmic idioms with elements of jazz, funk, and highlife. Known for its layered polyrhythms and socio-political messages, Afrobeat exemplifies both aesthetic richness and ideological depth, offering students a powerful lens through which to explore musical structure and civic consciousness (Ayodele, 2024). Highlife, adapted from Ghanaian palm-wine music, emerged as a popular urban genre in mid-20th century Nigeria. Its signature guitar-driven melodies and lyrical focus on societal issues make it an effective pedagogical tool for examining themes such as urbanization, postcolonial identity, and social evolution (Fadipe & Salawu, 2022).

Juju music, closely linked to Yoruba cosmology and values, is characterized by call-and-response vocals, intricate percussion patterns, and melodic guitar riffs. This genre is deeply interwoven with social rituals and thus provides rich material for lessons in musical analysis as well as cultural studies (Okunade, 2023). Similarly, *Apala* music, which developed among Muslim Yoruba communities, features traditional instruments like the *agidigbo* and talking drum. Its measured tempo and metaphorical lyrics not only support the development of attentive listening and poetic literacy but also offer insights into the intersection of music, religion, and oral tradition (Olupemi, 2017; Olusoji, 2008).

Fuji music, with roots in Islamic praise-singing and improvisational performance, thrives on complex rhythms and energetic delivery. Popular among urban youth, it serves as a compelling link between tradition and modernity, making it ideal for exploring identity formation in a rapidly changing society (Klein, 2020). Finally, Nigerian Gospel music, although anchored in Christian worship, creatively integrates indigenous languages, rhythms, and performance styles. This genre exemplifies the fusion of spirituality, culture, and sonic innovation, enjoying widespread acceptance across denominational lines (Adjagbara, 2023). These genres are pedagogically rich, offering multidimensional learning in rhythm, language, spirituality, and social ethics.

These traditions present a wealth of pedagogical possibilities. They promote multidimensional learning by engaging students in rhythmic mastery, linguistic diversity, spiritual reflection, and ethical discourse. Far beyond entertainment, they are living expressions of Nigerian identity and social memory—offering not only musical content but also culturally rooted methods of teaching and learning.

Educational Significance of Nigerian Music Traditions

The pedagogical potential of indigenous Nigerian music traditions extends beyond sonic appreciation to encompass identity formation, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and creative pedagogy. This section explores these dimensions in greater depth.

Cultural Literacy and Identity Formation

Culturally sensitive music instruction enhances students' understanding of their identity and heritage. Nigerian musical traditions include indigenous knowledge systems that express community values, religious beliefs, and language frameworks. Jayeola (2015) asserts that these traditions function as cultural norms that affirm students' lived experiences and socio-cultural identities. Hebert and Campbell (2000) observe that 'among all of the activities human possess as means by which to create a powerful sense of identity and community, music may be among the most popular and the most meaningful'. When students encounter *Apala*, *Fuji*, or *Juju* in classroom environments, they are not only studying music; they are connecting with ancestral memory and reinforcing their position within a profound legacy continuum. This kind of cultural literacy is essential in an age of increasing globalisation, when local identities may be drowned by prevailing cultural frameworks.

Historical Consciousness and Oral Tradition

Indigenous genres are intricately connected to the oral tradition, which has historically functioned as a medium for conveying historical information, ethical principles, and collective memory. Genres like Highlife and Afrobeat serve as lyrical narratives, offering insights into colonial exploitation, urban evolution, and postcolonial concerns. Waterman (1990) and Okpala (2016) highlight that musical genres may be seen as historical texts that encapsulate collective reactions to changing political and economic conditions.

Incorporating these genres into the curriculum allows students to develop an intricate knowledge of history via culturally rooted sources, connecting textbook narratives with lived realities.

Social Cohesion and Communal Learning

The communal element that defines indigenous music creation cultivates a feeling of collective purpose and community. Conventional musical practices—such as circle drumming, call-and-response singing, and festival performances—foster vital interpersonal abilities such as teamwork, empathy, attentive listening, and mutual respect. Ayorinde and Ajoye (2022) underscore the significance of collective music-making in fostering civic values and interconnectedness, essential for nation-building and classroom interactions. Integrating these methods into formal education could transform music classes into participatory, dialogical environments where students learn to connect, collaborate, and co-create.

Aesthetic and Creative Development

Nigerian musical traditions, rooted on improvisation, rhythmic complexity, and poetic lyricism, provide a rich foundation for nurturing creative thought. Genres like Fuji and Juju require spontaneous interaction between performers, audience, and environment, promoting a flexible and intuitive form of musicianship (Bakare, 2020). In resource-constrained schools, where access to Western instruments or notation may be limited, these traditions provide affordable, highly engaging alternatives that prioritise the body, the voice, and the community as fundamental tools of learning. Moreover, students develop both technical competencies and the aesthetic perception required for artistic creation and critical aural interpretation.

Challenges in Integrating Nigerian Music Traditions into Secondary Schools

Despite their pedagogical richness, systemic and structural challenges continue to inhibit the full incorporation of indigenous musical traditions into the national curriculum. This section expands on the previously identified barriers.

Curriculum Misalignment

The current framework of the Nigerian secondary school music curriculum is mostly influenced by British colonial legacy. Adeogun (2018) asserts that the focus on Western classical forms, staff notation, and European music theory marginalises non-Western epistemologies. This pedagogical bias alienates students from their cultural background and engenders cognitive dissonance, positioning indigenous knowledge systems as peripheral or inferior. Moreover, current assessment systems prioritise textual theory over physical or oral skills, hampering the evaluation of students' proficiency in indigenous performance practices within standardised evaluation structures.

Inadequate Teacher Training

A critical gap in music education reform lies within the human resource chain. Music instructors often get training in conservatory-style programs that emphasise piano competence, Western harmony, and choral directing, while offering little exposure to local traditions (Adeogun, 2021). Consequently, educators may lack the requisite practical fluency and cultural sensitivity necessary for the successful instruction of Nigerian genres. The gap is exacerbated by the absence of accessible procedure books, standardised curriculum, and certification frameworks for indigenous music education, resulting in many instructors being inadequately prepared to effectively integrate local forms meaningfully into their teaching.

Resource Constraints

Many secondary schools in Nigeria face severe infrastructural and material deficits, with music education often being the most neglected area. Traditional instruments—agidigbo, omele, udu, and others—are rarely available, and when they are, they may be viewed more as cultural curiosities than functional teaching tools. Furthermore, schools often lack basic facilities such as rehearsal spaces, audio playback equipment, and indigenous music archives. These limitations hinder both instruction and student engagement, making the effective delivery of Nigerian music education logistically challenging.

Perception and Prestige Bias

There is a persistent bias—rooted in both colonial history and aspirational middle-class values—that associates musical sophistication with Western art music. Parents and school administrators often push students toward Western instruments and repertoire as a perceived pathway to social mobility and academic excellence. This perception not only delegitimizes local musical practices but also places pressure on educators to conform to Eurocentric standards, even when these are pedagogically or culturally inappropriate (Adedeji, 2016). Overcoming this bias requires sustained advocacy and a reframing of what constitutes musical excellence in the Nigerian context.

Technological and Generational Shifts

The intergenerational transmission of indigenous music has typically depended on oral instruction, apprenticeship frameworks, and communal performance settings. Nonetheless, the emergence of algorithmic music distribution and on-demand media platforms has led to a growing inclination among younger Nigerians towards global pop aesthetics. Olusoji (2020) and Bakare (2020) argue that without urgent initiatives in digitisation and media literacy, these musical genres and traditions may disappear from collective memory. The absence of systematic documentation—such as transcriptions, audio recordings, and interviews with tradition-bearers—hampers scholarly and educational access to these traditions.

An Interdisciplinary Framework for Integration

To meaningfully integrate Nigerian music traditions into secondary education, a narrow disciplinary lens is insufficient. Music must be approached as a cultural system, a historical text, a pedagogical process, and a lived experience. This section elaborates on a multidimensional framework rooted in interdisciplinary collaboration.

Musicology

The systematic examination of musical structure, rhythm, tonality, and form offers a robust foundation for interacting with Nigerian genres in an educational setting. Rhythmic transcription approaches enable pupils to identify polyrhythmic textures like Fuji or Afrobeat, fostering analytical skills and cultural understanding. Parncutt (2007) advocates for a contextualised music theory that incorporates non-Western modalities and metric systems. Incorporating indigenous resources into fundamental theory programs allows students to explore ideas such as additive meter, call-and-response form, and vocal performing techniques.

Anthropology and Cultural Studies

Understanding the social functions and symbolic meanings of music is central to decolonizing music education. Ethnomusicological approaches position music as a form of situated knowledge, embedded within ritual, politics, gender, and spirituality (Waterman, 1990; Danja, 2023). This perspective encourages students to analyze how music operates within specific cultural ecologies—e.g., how Juju enacts Yoruba cosmology, or how Gospel music mediates between spirituality and modern identity. Cultural studies also support a critical inquiry into issues such as class, hybridity, and the commodification of tradition.

History

Historical inquiry illuminates the socio-political conditions under which various Nigerian genres emerged. Genres like Highlife and Afrobeat not only offer aesthetic experiences but also act as windows into anti-colonial resistance, pan-African consciousness, and urbanization (Arowosegbe, 2016). Teaching the historical trajectories of these forms enables students to grasp the entanglement of music with power, identity, and memory. Classroom activities may include archival listening sessions, genre timelines, or oral history projects involving community elders and musicians.

Pedagogy and Curriculum Studies

Effective integration requires curricular innovation that values both formal and informal learning. As Barrett (2001) and Holbrook (2013) suggest, interdisciplinary pedagogy should prioritize learner-centered and experience-based methods. Suggested strategies include:

Workshops with traditional musicians: These foster intergenerational dialogue and mentorship.

Field trips to festivals or shrines: These provide immersive learning in performance context.

Project-based learning: Students can create genre documentaries, transcribe songs, or compose original works using traditional instruments.

Performance-based assessments: These recognize oral fluency, interpretive skill, and collaborative performance—not just theoretical knowledge.

Recommendations

Curriculum Reform

The national music curriculum should be revised to reflect a balanced representation of both Western and Nigerian traditions. Modules should include:

Performance of local instruments

Analytical study of genres

Music in relation to religion, politics, and social change

Teacher Development

Universities and colleges of education must introduce courses in indigenous music performance and pedagogy. Professional development workshops should pair music teachers with traditional musicians for hands-on training.

Infrastructure Support

Government and NGOs should invest in acquiring traditional instruments, recording facilities, and culturally relevant teaching materials. Schools can collaborate with local artists to create shared musical spaces.

Digital Documentation and Access

There is a pressing need for the digitization of Nigerian music traditions. Educational repositories, open-access audio libraries, and mobile apps can make indigenous music accessible to younger generations while preserving it for future scholarship.

Public Advocacy and Policy Engagement

Educational stakeholders—parents, principals, religious leaders, and policymakers—should be sensitized to the value of indigenous music education. National campaigns can help reposition traditional music as a vital component of holistic development.

Conclusion

The marginalization of Nigerian music traditions in secondary education is not merely a curricular-oversight—it is a cultural and epistemological crisis. As Nigeria strives to balance global engagement with local relevance, the reintegration of indigenous music into the education system emerges as both a cultural imperative and a pedagogical opportunity.

By adopting an interdisciplinary framework grounded in musicology, anthropology, history, and pedagogy, schools can transform music education from a Eurocentric vestige into a site of cultural affirmation and intellectual diversity. Strategic reforms in curriculum design, teacher training, infrastructure provision, and digital innovation are necessary to bridge this gap.

Ultimately, to teach Nigerian music traditions is to teach Nigeria itself: its histories, its struggles, its spiritualities, and its creative futures.

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