

FROM HIGHLIFE TO STREET-POP: THE EVOLUTION OF IGBO POPULAR MUSIC IN THE NIGERIAN MUSIC SCENE

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Abstract

This paper explores how music performance acts as a vehicle for intercultural dialogue, tracing the evolution of Igbo musical identity from Highlife to Street-pop genres in Nigeria. By examining the stylistic and thematic transitions, this study argues that Igbo popular musicians have consistently negotiated cultural borders, infused traditional elements into popular trends, and contributed meaningfully to national and global musical narratives. Through historical review, content analysis, and cultural criticism, the paper reveals the continuity, hybridity, and resilience embedded in Igbo music performance practices. The primary data for this paper were generated through an observational method of monitoring the Nigerian popular music scene, especially the highlife genre and its emerging styles and hybrids. The secondary data were sourced through online articles, texts and discographies of selected musicians. The theoretical foundation of this study is drawn from the Social Change Theories, specifically from Evolutionary and Modernization theories, respectively. The standpoint of these theories focuses on societal transformation over time with encompassing shifts in societal structures, relationships, and cultural norms. This study explores the key changes in the musical practices of selected Igbo popular musicians across generations. While highlife music continues to hold a special place in the Nigerian music scene, Street-Pop has equally emerged as a dominant force in the industry, shaping the soundscape and music performance style in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Music performance, Intercultural dialogue, Street-pop, Highlife, Igbo music

Introduction

Nigeria has a rich and diverse musical heritage/ culture that has evolved over the years, reflecting the country's cultural diversity and historical influences. From traditional highlife music to contemporary street pop, Nigerian music has undergone significant transformations across generations, reflecting its audience's changing tastes and preferences. It is a well-embraced phenomenon that all manners of development start and end with individuals who are physically fit, emotionally stable, and mentally balanced (Onwuegbuna, 2011). Nigerian music has always mirrored the socio-political realities of its time, serving as a commentary on social issues and a reflection of the nation's struggles and triumphs. Over the years, Nigerian music artists have become irresistible catalysts within the music scene, regardless of their ages, sex, ethnic/ cultural background, and religious and political affiliations.

The Nigerian popular music scene has been filled with countless musical creations embellished with diverse cultural contents (Afrocentric and Eurocentric), showcasing individual talents and idiosyncrasies. The diverse cultural backgrounds of Nigeria's ethnic groups shape distinct musical styles, creating a rich interplay that enhances the overall music scene. The digital dispensation has, however, given multiple platforms for these musicians to express their innate and acquired abilities in music vocation and, to a large extent, expose them to local/ foreign collaborators and competitors alike. The evolution of popular culture from mass media to digital media has remained phenomenal, and it has, as it were, helped converge different musical genres and styles and further encouraged the hybridization of the same (Patti, n.d.).

The purpose of this paper, however, is to explore how Nigeria's traditional and contemporary music genres have evolved from the post-independent era to the present—especially from the 'Igbo' perspective and, in comparison, to their Yoruba counterpart. It will equally examine the influence of Indigenous/neo-folk styles on contemporary styles like Naijabeats or street pop music, highlighting the works of key artists of Igbo extraction and moments that have helped shape this transformation.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs descriptive method in describing the key Igbo highlife genre and its emerging styles and hybrids within the twenty-first century in the Nigerian popular music scene. The primary data for this study were gathered through an observational method of monitoring the Nigerian popular music scene, especially the highlife genre and its emerging styles and hybrids. Historical discourse through content analysis, and cultural criticism were employed to discuss the continuity, hybridity, and resilience embedded in Igbo music performance practices, especially in digital era where global relevance is a key factor. By historical analysis, evolutionary trends of key contemporary musical styles of the Igbo highlife genre are traced and discussed.

Selected musical samples of notable Igbo popular musicians are however subjected to content analysis in order to see how they depict the socio-cultural exigencies of the Igbos in their musical exchanges in relation to their counterparts from other ethnic divide. The secondary data were gathered through online journals, published articles and other relevant materials.

The theoretical foundation of this study is drawn from the Social Change Theories, specifically from Evolutionary and Modernization theories, respectively. The standpoint of these theories focuses on societal transformation over time with encompassing shifts in societal structures, relationships, and cultural norms. Going by the evolution factor, historians and ethnographers agree that culture (especially its musical element) is a very difficult concept to study, because it is constantly undergoing its own process of evolution, which involves changes and adaptations to present realities (Merriam 1967). Since this paper is interested in knowing how Igbo popular music culture evolved within the period specified, the evolution factor, however, underpins the intent and purpose expressed thus far. The varying elements of musical culture, such as performance style, music products or style, listening audience, industry, and technological advancement, will be used as parameters to determine the extent of evolution experienced in the musical landscape of the Igbo popular culture from past to present.

Traditional Music in Nigeria

Musical practices of the Igbo are seen through their social, religious, and cultural lives as music accompanies every stage of their human and social cycle and development (child – adulthood; birth). Traditional music (*Egwu odi-n'ala*), as embedded in the people's cultural practices, is associated with social and ritual ceremonies (Osigwe, 2016, p. 21). Folk songs were commonly used in this aspect of music, as nobody owned the songs. The adherence to the Christian faith by the Igbos has greatly influenced their folksy engagement in music. The notable folk musical styles engaged by local musicians include the *igede*, *nkpokiti*, *egedege*, *atilogwu*, *nkwa-nwite*, *nkwa-umuagboghò*, and *egwu amala*. Moreover, those that featured different masquerades identified with notable communities within the Igbo region. The Hausa perform *rokon fada*, *boorii*, and *asauwara*, while the Yoruba have numerous styles, including *waka*, *sakara*, and *ere-ege* (Onwegbuna, 2010b).

DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHLIFE MUSIC

Neo-folk Era (1960-80)

Urbanization and industrialization (legacies left behind by the European colonial masters) were key happenstances within major cities in Nigeria, Lagos, Ibadan, Onitsha, Port-Harcourt, Calabar, etc. Different ethnic groups migrated to urban centers to form a stratified society based on socio-economic status (Onwegbuna, 2010a). He further opined that the recreational evolved the neo-folk styles from the three functional music classes in the Igbo society: occasional, incidental, and recreational. Neo-folk, also known as neo-traditional music, is a genre that blends elements of traditional folk with popular culture, thereby allowing hybrid styles to emerge. Within the Igbo region, *egwu-ubo-aka* – thumb piano music, *akuko-n'egwu* – storytelling music, and *egwu ikwokilikwo* (known as the Igbo native blues) – a highlife version of the Igbo music – were the notable genres within the era. The highlife musical style (with its variants) was the most propagated musical genre, especially within the urban centres. Musicians perform this kind of music specifically to provide entertainment for their audiences. In his account, Bright Chimezie (2013) reveals that Igbo highlife in Nigeria evolved from two (2) distinct sources, that is, musical styles of local instrumental ensembles (*égwú èkpìlì*, *égwú òdùmódù*, *égwú ògèné*, and *nkwa*); and fusion of western elements (musical instruments – guitars (lead & bass), trumpets, horns electronic keyboard, congas, maracas, set-drums, etc.; equipment - microphones, sound mixers, speakers, etc.).

Egwu-ubo-aka – thumb piano music was the earliest neo-folk style performed at palm wine or drinking joints in the major cities around the eastern region. This instrument - which has iron/ metallic tines usually plucked with the thumb to produce a melodic sound – was used to accompany solo renditions of folktales, local odes, and popular Christian hymns to entertain the audience who are having a fabulous evening drink at a local bar. The *ubo-aka* instrument was equally used to accompany music that involves storytelling (*akuko-n'egwu*) that teaches morals, bravery, loyalty and political awareness. Over time, the *ubo-aka* instrument was replaced by the lead or box guitar, which is of Western origin. The notable Igbo musician within this era who propagated this musical style of storytelling with the guitar was Gentleman Mike Ejeagha (as he was popularly called) in the early seventies. He is a folklorist from Imezi-owa in Enugu State, Nigeria, and a veteran guest presenter with the Nigerian Television Authority.



Figure 1 – a picture showing the ‘Ubo-aka’ instrument by an Igbo musician

Highlife music, however, took centre stage in the music scene in the sixties and seventies before the civil war in Nigeria. All the major ethnic groups (Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa) in Nigeria created different variants of the musical genre. Within the socio-cultural context, highlife music depicts the music for the higher class in society, the elites, and not for the commoners (Omojola, 2006: p.53). Different academic works alluded to the fact that highlife music originated from Ghana into Nigeria in the early '30s through one of its sole proponents – Emmanuel Teytey Mensah, who was regarded as the father of Highlife music (Vidal, 2012; Ekwueme, 2004b; Obidike, 2012; Omojola, 2006; Emielu, 2011b, and Olusoji, 2011). Characterised by its upbeat tempo, melodic guitar riffs, and socially conscious lyrics, highlife music was the soundtrack of Nigeria's independence era, reflecting the optimism and aspirations of a newly liberated nation.

The Igbo version of the highlife genre is called *Ikwo'kilikwo'* (an Igbo native blues). It was greatly influenced by the 'Congo music' - from the Eastern part of Africa - and characterized by the use of guitar instruments. The most popular exponents of *Ikwo'kilikwo'* of the Igbo extraction were Osita Osadebe, Oliver de Coque, the Oriental Brothers, and Celestine Ukwu. These musicians, as mentioned above, have been known for their musical landmarks, ingenuity, creativity, vocal dexterity, and lyrical prowess (Obi, 2011; Asobele, 2002; Ekwueme, 2004b). The Yoruba version of the highlife genre involves fuji, apala, sakara, waka juju, and pure highlife (which was influenced by Mensah from Ghana). Notable highlife musicians from southwest Nigeria within the post-independence era include Sikiru Ayinde, Ayinla Kollington, Ayinla Omowura, Alhaji Dauda Epo-Akara (fuji/ were); Tunde Nightingale, Julius Araba, I.K. Dairo, Chief Ebenezer Obey, King Sunny Ade (juju music); Victor Olaiya, Fatai Rolling Dollar, and Bobby Benson – pure highlife (Oikelome, 2001). They were known for blending traditional African rhythms with Western influences to create a unique and vibrant sound.

Along with the development of highlife music was the rise of Afrobeat, a fusion of highlife, jazz, funk, and traditional African rhythms pioneered by the legendary Fela Kuti in the 70's. Known for his politically charged lyrics and energetic performances, Fela Kuti became a cultural icon and a voice of resistance against the oppressive military regime in Nigeria.

New Musical Era (1980-2000)

Immediately after the civil war in Nigeria (1967-70), the Igbos, who were greatly affected by the war, lost some time in their musical practices, especially in the highlife genre, as most of their musicians were conscripted in the Biafran army to fight in the war. Their counterparts from the southwest region maintained their musical practices but, on the other hand, searched for newer ways and platforms to express their musical creativity, especially the well-educated ones. The embrace of foreign musical styles (jazz, blues, gospel, soul, disco, funk, rock, reggae, calypso, rhythm 'n' blues, rap, etc.) gave rise to hybridized forms that coined names such as *Afro-funk*, *Afro-reggae*, *Afro-jazz*, *Afro-hip hop*, *Afro-rock*, *Afro-calypso*, *Afro-disco*, *Afro-soul*, etc. More educated Nigerian youth participated actively in these new musical forms by re-interpreting these Afro styles using their African sense of musical performance and developing their urban neo-folk styles, using available Western musical instruments at their disposal (Onwuegbuna, 2010b). This innovative musical trend also impacted the existing neo-folk styles, especially those from the Yoruba extraction. Musical styles such as Juju and Fuji evolved to newer forms such as afro-juju and afro-fuji and the like.

Notable musicians of the era are identified under different popular musical typologies:

1. **Modern Highlife (Igbo)** - Nelly Uchendu, Tony Okoroji, Onyeka Onwenu, Chrysy E. Igbokwe, Dora Ifudu, Chris Mba, Charles Oputa, etc.
2. **Afro-juju** - Sir Shina Peters, Dayo Kujure, Dele Taiwo, etc.
3. **Afro-fuji** – Saheed Osupa, Ayinde Barrister, Kwam1 De Ultimate, Adewale Ayuba, etc

4. **Afro-reggae** – Ras Kimono, Majek Fashek, Orits Wiliki, Edna Ogholi, the Mandators, etc.
5. **Afro/ Naija hip-hop** - Junior & Pretty, Eedris Abdulkareem, Tony Tetuila, Ruggedman, Naeto C, Obiwon, etc.

The following are perceived features of the musical era with its typologies:

1. Melodic instruments such as electronic keyboards, Lead and bass guitars, Saxophones, and Trumpets enhance the rhythmic structure of the music. Both melodic and percussive instruments participate equally in the song.
2. The lyrical content is adapted using foreign languages (English, French, Afrikan, etc.) or performed using local dialects or their variants (code-switching). The social themes are drawn from love stories, adventures, folk tales, political and religious themes, womanhood, marriage, etc.
3. Musicians of this era are primarily young and middle-aged people who are well-educated, trained, exposed, and well-traveled. Some practice music part-time while having full-time vocations like Accountancy, Banking, Broadcasting, Acting, Engineering, etc., on the side.
4. The audience comprises people of mixed ethnic backgrounds, and the musicians explore other local Nigerian dialects (Yoruba, Efik, Hausa, and Ibibio) in their songs to propagate national unity among citizens.
5. The music is usually recorded on LPs, Audio Cassettes, and VCRs. Tracks or albums are recorded digitally or analogically (Osigwe, 2016).

Street-Pop (Naija Hip-hop) Era (2000-2025)

This musical style took center stage beyond the millennium era and was heralded by the rise of digital media. It has revolutionized the music industry in Nigeria, providing platforms for artists to showcase their talent and connect with fans globally. Street pop, or street hop, is a musical genre that combines Nigerian hip-hop (Naija hip-hop) with Western and African electronic dance. The artists of this musical style (usually a hybrid) often create and popularize new dance routines, such as the *Shaku-shaku dance*, *Galala/ Swor dance*, and *Azonto*, to mention a few. Most street-pop artists usually sing about their hood, which represents the habitat of the low and poor people within the societal strata. They use their musical platforms to reveal the ills and problems associated with their neighborhood. They are young musicians, usually referred to as “artists,” full of exuberance, and most times linked with a few societal vices such as Yahoo-Yahoo (internet fraud), street hooliganism, use of hard drugs, cultism, and a host of others. Their music is usually meant for the “street guys” who are die-hard fans of mainstream entertainment. Over time, they have gained nationwide acceptance with their musical trade, which speaks of their personal stories and life journeys (usually grass-to-grace stories).

However, the following musical attributes are associated with the street pop music in Nigeria:

1. The core of street pop is its connection to roots and the parlance with which it is delivered. It features collaborations between artists of the same or different ethnic extractions in Nigeria. Foreign collaborations are also frequent.
2. Creative use of existing lyrical content of old neo-folk or highlife tunes into a new masterpiece that is in tandem with societal struggles and challenges or purely for entertainment purposes.
3. The use of rap, usually in the mother tongue or code-switch, to express musical thoughts, ideologies, and sentiments.
4. This kind of music is driven by the younger generation of musicians and equally enjoyed by the same age group. Most young artists crave stage popularity and fast monetary gains more than having a good, quality music production.
5. The accompanying musical tones or sounds in the music are digitally generated (both percussive and melodic). The music emphasizes a strong and loud recurring beat pattern usually supplied by a side-kick drum, which is also synthesized. Vocal deliveries by these artists are often enhanced using different applications programmed for such purposes.
6. Street pop music is heavily influenced by code-switching techniques, that is, using Nigerian local languages (Igbo, Efik, Hausa, Yoruba, etc.), Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), and English language, respectively, within a particular song.
7. The artists are usually known by their pseudonyms. These names give them their unique identities as performers and as brands.
8. The digital dispensation has helped propel street-pop music advancement in Nigeria by opening doors of opportunities for young artists. This includes foreign collaborations, music production and recording under foreign labels, and the exchange of musical and technological ideas.

Other gains of digital dispensation on the development of street pop music in Nigeria:

- Musicians can now collaborate effortlessly with artists from all over the world.
- Digital platforms enable musicians to present their work to global audiences, significantly expanding their reach.

- Digital tools facilitate connections between musicians and industry professionals, enhancing career opportunities.
- Artists can employ innovative marketing strategies online, making it easier to promote their music effectively.

Notable street pop artists in Nigeria:

1. **IGBO Artists** – Phyno, MC Loph, Rhyno, Bracket, SlowDog, Mr. Raw, 2Shot, Flavour, Humblesmith, P-Square, Patoranking, Ruggedman, Larry Gaaga, Tekno, etc.
2. **Yoruba Artists and others** – Dagrín, Olamide, 9ice, D'Banj, 2face Idibia, Asa, Banky W, Wande Cole, Davido, WizKid, Brymo, Burna Boy, Seun Kuti, Ice Prince, Korede Bello, Mode 9, Mo'Cheddah, Naira Marley, Paul Play Dairo, Terry G, Tiwa Salvage, and so on.
3. The development of highlife music genres in Nigeria is thus summarized in the diagram below:

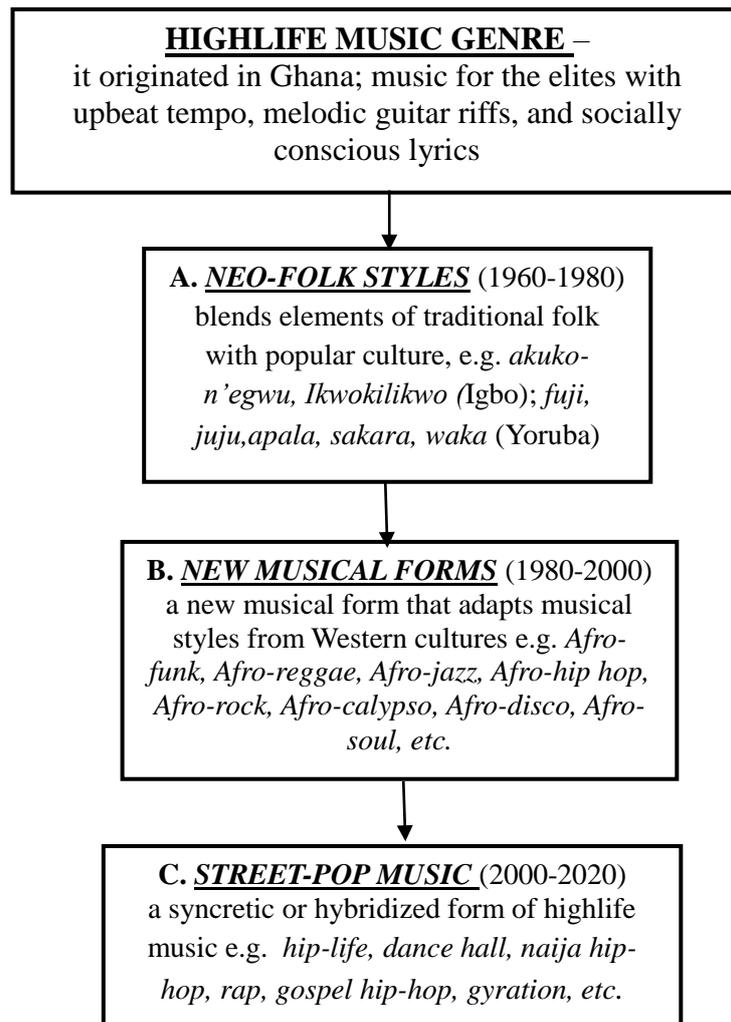
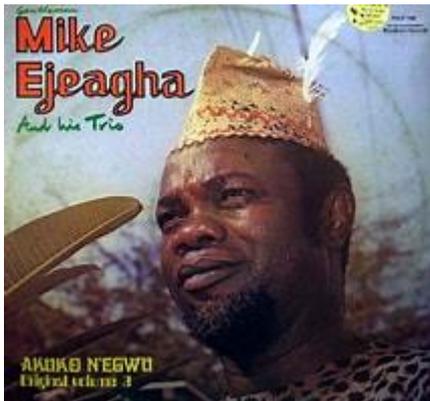


Figure 1 – tableshooting the development of Highlife music from the post-independence era till date.
Notable (Igbo) Musicians and Their Contributions

However, this paper will not be fulfilled if specific musicians/ artists of Igbo extraction are not mentioned for emphasis's sake. The purpose is to x-ray at least one of their musical contributions to ascertain whether it wears the necessary garb, that is, intrinsic features that define its existence within a specific musical era or period in the Nigerian music scene. Three (3) notable musicians/ artists from each of the aforementioned musical eras (in which the development of highlife music hitherto evolved) are discussed below.

1. MIKE EJEAGHA (4 April 1930 till date)



He is a Nigerian folklorist, songwriter, and musician from Enugu State. He hails from *Imezi Owa* in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State. He grew up in Coal Camp in a family headed by his civil servant father, then worked with the Ministry of Health in Enugu. Ejeagha started his career in music in the mid-20th century. Also known as **Gentleman Mike Ejeagha**, he has been influential in the evolution of music in the Igbo language, especially the *Akuko n'egwu* (one of the Igbo neo-folk styles) for over 6 decades. His first hit was in 1960 – the year of Nigeria's independence. One of his musical works that will be analyzed (through audio-visual means) is the popular song “*Ka esi le onyi isi oche.*” The song embodies the true tapestry of Igbo neo-folk style within its content.

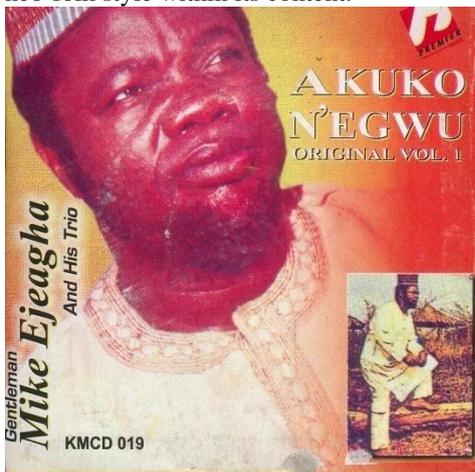


Figure 2 – Album cover of “*Akuko N'egwu*” (Mike Ejeagha)

From the analysis of the audio-video format of the afore-mentioned song, the following were observed:

- The title of the song “*Ka esi le onyi isi oche*” means ‘how the chairman was betrayed.’ It is performed in a slow tempo movement of 16 minutes duration.
- The lyrical content is of Igbo folklore, depicting a storyline using animals as main characters (King Lion – *Eze Odum*, Elephant - *Enyi*, and Tortoise - *mbe*). The use of the onomatopoeic phrase “Gwo Gwo Gwo Ngwo” (represents the sound of an elephant’s footsteps). The song narrates how the tortoise sold out his friend, the elephant, as a price to marry the king’s (Lion's) daughter.
- The accompanying instruments are the acoustic box guitar, the lead guitar, the iron pot (*Udu*), the time-line (*Okpokolo*), and shakers.
- The vocal structure of the song comprises a solo voice with 2 complementing voices resulting in a trio performance.

2. ONYEKA ONWENU (31 January 1952 – 30 July 2024)



She was a Nigerian singer-songwriter, actress, human rights and social activist, journalist, politician, and *X Factor* series judge. Dubbed the "**Elegant Stallion**" due to her significant impact on African culture and entertainment, Onwenu was the chairperson of the Imo State Council for Arts and Culture. In 2013, she was appointed the Executive Director/Chief Executive Officer of the National Centre for Women's Development. One of her songs, "**Iyogogo**" (which was released in the new musical era), is to be analyzed through audio-visual means. The popular song depicts the true Igbo folksy structure within its content.



Figure 3 – Song track "**Iyogogo**" (Onyeka Onwenu)

From the analysis of the video format of the afore-mentioned song, the following were observed:

- The title of the song "**Iyogogo**" means an exciting phrase usually exclaimed when good news is received. It has a moderately fast tempo movement due to the infused dances, and with a duration of 4minutes 33 seconds.
- The lyrical content is made up of code-switching between the Igbo and English languages. The use of the onomatopoeic phrase "*Iyele Iyele Iyele*" (represents a gleeful sound that equally initiates a dance, especially by someone excited or extremely happy). The song is a love ballad that speaks on inconsistencies in a marital relationship between partners.
- The accompanying instruments are digitally mastered with the infusion of western (bass and lead guitars, keyboards, drums, and other synthesized sounds) and local elements such as the shakers (beaded gourd).
- The vocal structure of the song comprises a solo voice with other complementary voices. The use of the bass voice to re-enact an ostinato in the songs gives it a unique choral structure and blend.
- The choreographed dance steps in the video showcase the rich cultural dance ensembles domiciled in the south-east of Nigeria. The colorful display of costumes and cultural artefacts testifies to the deep inclination of the artist to ethnic (Igbo) representation and loyalty.

3. FLAVOUR, PHYNO, and LARRY GAAGA



These three (3) represent the notable and popular street-pop artists of the Igbo extraction. Their collaborative musical works in the popular music industry have greatly impacted positively on the general outlook of the street-pop music in Nigeria, both locally and globally.

a) **FLAVOUR, Chinedu Izuchukwu Okoli** (born 23rd November 1983)

He is known by his stage name **Flavour N'abania** or simply **Flavour**, and hails from Umunze in Orumba South LGA, Anambra State, in southeast Nigeria. He began his musical career as a drummer for a local church. Flavour is popularly known across Africa and the world for his hit song "*Nwa BaBy (Ashawo Remix)*". He is currently signed to 2nite Entertainment.

b) **PHYNO, Chibuzo Nelson Azubuike Ezege** (born 9th October 1986)

He is known professionally as Phyno, a rapper, singer, songwriter, and record producer. Phyno was born and raised in Enugu State but is a native of Anambra State. He started his music career as a producer in 2003 and primarily raps in Igbo. He had his debut studio album *No Guts No Glory*, released in March 2014.

c) **LARRY GAAGA, Larry Ndianefo** (born 25th August, 1981)

He is professionally known as **Larry Gaaga**, is a songwriter, recording artist, music producer, and record label executive. He hails from Abia in Abia State, and he gained fame with the success of 'Gaaga Shuffle', a song he performed alongside Innocent '2Baba' Idibia. Larry Gaaga has been very active in the Nigerian music industry, coming up with good music and top-notch collaborations.

The song "*Obodo*" was a collaborative work between these three artists. And it was an effort to remix the evergreen music of Queen Theresa Onuorah titled "*Egedege*." This attempt, however, tries to blend the music of the older generation with that of the digitally influenced street-pop music. The musical track was produced by Larry Gaaga and featured both Favour and Phyno in the video clip.



Figure 4 – Song track "*Obodo*" (Larry Gaaga, Flavour, Phyno, Theresa Onuroh)

From the analysis of the video format of the afore-mentioned song, the following were observed:

- The title of the song “*Obodo*” means a City or a set of people within a particular geographical location. It has a fast tempo movement associated with modern-day hip-hop dance hall beats, with the duration of 3minutes 31 seconds.
- The lyrical content is made up of Igbo folk texts, which highlight joyful and gleeful moments of merry-making and jocund celebration.
- The accompanying instruments are digitally mastered with the infusion of western (bass and lead guitars, keyboards, drums, and other synthesized sounds) and local elements such as the shakers (beaded gourd) and percussive elements
- The vocal structure of the song comprises different solo sections of a female and male singing voices (Theresa Onuorah and Flavour), and a male voice doing a rap (Phyno). This, however, gives a unique choral structure and blend.
- The choreographed dance steps in the video showcase the rich cultural dance ensembles domiciled in the south-east of Nigeria. The colorful display of costumes and cultural artefacts testifies to the strict adherence of the performing artists to promoting Igbo cultural values and traditions. This also portrays true ethnic (Igbo) representation and loyalty by the performing artists

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of Highlife music to Street-Pop in the Nigerian music scene represents a dynamic shift in cultural expression and artistic innovation. While Highlife music continues to hold a special place in the hearts of Nigerians, Street-Pop has emerged as a dominant force in the industry, shaping the sound and style of contemporary Nigerian music. As the music scene continues to evolve, artists, producers, and fans need to reflect on the cultural significance of these genres and the impact they have on society.

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