



Echoes of Activism: The Decline of Reggae Music in Nigeria; Causes, Effects and Solutions

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Abstract

This study investigates the steady decline of reggae music in contemporary Nigeria, examining its causes and its impact on society. While Nigeria's music industry has expanded and gained global recognition, much current popular music is marked by vague, fashionable lyrics that contrast sharply with the era when reggae served as a powerful vehicle for activism, truth and the expression of marginalised voices. To understand this shift, the researcher engaged with music producers, promoters, broadcasters, and emerging artistes to identify the factors behind the reduced appreciation and production of reggae. Findings indicate that Nigerian audiences are increasingly immersed in commercially driven contemporary styles, resulting in a diminished presence of socially conscious music. Although the industry thrives commercially, the activist spirit traditionally associated with reggae has weakened. The study concludes that the decline of reggae has contributed to the fading role of music as a tool for social truth and advocacy. It argues that deliberate efforts are needed to revive this tradition and restore music's capacity to challenge injustice and inspire social awareness.

Keywords: Causes, Decline of Reggae Music, Echoes of Activism, Effects and Solutions, Nigeria



Introduction

Music has long possessed the power to stir human emotions and shape social consciousness. Music stirs the soul to do its bidding. The heart of man is a victim of music as soon as it is received with an open mind. Among the many musical forms that move listeners in this way, reggae stands out for its distinctive capacity to articulate social struggle, affirm dignity and mobilise collective action.

Scholars widely agree that reggae emerged in Jamaica in the late 1960s, developing out of earlier styles such as ska and rocksteady and quickly becoming a central vehicle for popular expression among the urban poor (Barrow & Dalton, 2004; Hebdige, 1987). Rooted in Afro-Caribbean rhythms and Rastafari spirituality, reggae provided a sonic language through which marginalised communities narrated histories of enslavement, colonialism and economic exclusion, while imagining liberation and return to Africa (Daynes, 2010; Ifekwe, 2012).

The relationship between reggae and Rastafari has been extensively documented. Rastafari emerged in Jamaica in the 1930s, inspired in part by Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanist vision and the coronation of Haile Selassie I in Ethiopia, which many followers interpreted as the fulfilment of a prophetic "Black king" who would lead Africans to redemption (Ifekwe, 2012; Homiak, 2021). Through this politico-religious movement, Ethiopia became a spiritual homeland and a symbol of resistance to "Babylon," a metaphor for systems of oppression. Reggae artists drew heavily on Rastafari imagery and theology, using music to denounce "mental slavery," racial injustice and neo-colonial exploitation, while affirming Black pride and African heritage (Daynes, 2010; Homiak, 2021).

From the 1970s onwards, roots reggae played a major role in transforming Jamaica's national identity from an Anglophile post-colony into a self-consciously Black nation with a proud African lineage (Homiak, 2021). Internationally, artists such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Burning Spear carried reggae's messages of resistance and hope across the globe, influencing social movements in Britain, the United States and many African countries (Barrow & Dalton, 2004; Stolzoff, 2000). In recognition of its global impact and enduring social significance, UNESCO inscribed reggae on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2018 (Homiak, 2021).

In Nigeria, reggae's arrival and localisation from the late 1970s and 1980s created a powerful platform for social commentary. Nigerian artists adapted Jamaican reggae idioms to address domestic concerns, including military dictatorship, corruption, economic hardship and everyday struggles of the urban poor. The original introduction notes that "between 1980 to early 2000s, the beat and sound of reggae music rip through the airwaves of Nigeria like a sonic colossus... It was indeed the voice of the voiceless" (Author, n.d.). Nigerian reggae musicians such as Majek Fashek, Ras Kimono, The Mandators, Evi Edna Ogoli, King Wadada, Blackky and Daniel Wilson became prominent cultural figures whose songs challenged authoritarian rule and called for justice, transparency and compassion.



Figure 1. *Majek Fashek, Nigerian reggae legend.*

Reggae's role as a vehicle for activism in Nigeria is evident in its continued use during moments of political contestation. For example, during the 2025 protests at the National Assembly over electoral reforms, demonstrators reportedly played African China's track *Mr President*, whose chorus demands that leaders "lead us well" and urges police officers "no dey take bribe," directly confronting entrenched practices of corruption. Such songs exemplify reggae's capacity to "speak truth to power," mobilise citizens and articulate collective grievances in accessible, emotionally resonant forms.

At the same time, scholarly work on reggae and protest music underscores that this activist function is not unique to Nigeria. Across the African diaspora, reggae has been used to critique racism, economic inequality, and state violence, and to promote visions of social transformation grounded in solidarity and spiritual renewal (Daynes, 2010; Ifekwe, 2012; Veal, 2007). In many contexts, reggae's emphasis on lyrical content, moral reflection and historical memory contrasts sharply with more commercially oriented genres whose primary focus is entertainment rather than social critique.



Figure 2. *Ras Kimono, Nigerian reggae legend.*



The present study is situated within this broader scholarly and historical landscape, but focuses specifically on the contemporary Nigerian music scene, where reggae's once dominant presence has markedly declined. While Nigeria's music industry has expanded and gained global visibility through genres such as Afrobeats, hip-life and dancehall-influenced pop, much of this output is characterised by vague love and lust and music made for the market, with limited attention to socio-political issues. The decline of reggae in this context raises important questions about the changing role of music in Nigerian public life, the erosion of sonic activism and the implications for democratic culture and civic engagement.

This research therefore seeks to investigate the factors behind the loud decline in reggae music in Nigeria and to explore what can be done to reverse this adverse trend. It examines industry dynamics, economic pressures, cultural influences and media practices that have contributed to reggae's marginalisation, and considers how policy interventions, institutional recognition and targeted promotion might help restore reggae's visibility and activist potential. By situating Nigerian reggae within the wider history of reggae and Rastafari, and by drawing on both scholarly literature and empirical observations from the Nigerian context, the study aims to illuminate how a once powerful "voice of the voiceless" has been muted, and how it might yet be re-energised as a sonic vehicle for social justice.

Literature Review

Early scholarly discussions of reggae's transnational development highlight its complex relationship with West African musical traditions. Although popular claims exist that Jimmy Cliff once suggested reggae drew inspiration from Nigerian highlife (Coolins, 1996; Kehinde, 2011, as cited in Onwuegbuna, 2016), academic consensus maintains that reggae emerged primarily from Jamaican musical lineages, particularly ska and rocksteady (Barrow & Dalton, 2004; Bradley, 2000). Nonetheless, scholars acknowledge long-standing musical exchanges between West Africa and the Caribbean, facilitated by shared histories of enslavement, migration and cultural retention (Collins, 2012; Agawu, 2016).

Reggae's emergence in late-1960s Jamaica is well documented. It developed from earlier genres such as mento, ska, and rocksteady, and incorporated rhythmic elements from Afro-Jamaican religious drumming traditions including Kumina, Nyabinghi and Burru (Bilby, 2010; Veal, 2007). The genre is characterised by a slower tempo than ska, a pronounced emphasis on the downbeat, and syncopated offbeat guitar or piano chords (Barrow & Dalton, 2004). Waters (1994) describes reggae as a music that moves listeners "in body and spirit in an immediate, powerful way," underscoring its emotive and spiritual resonance.

Reggae's close association with Rastafari has been extensively explored in scholarship. Rastafari emerged in Jamaica in the 1930s, drawing on Pan-Africanist thought, biblical hermeneutics and the symbolism of Ethiopia under Emperor Haile Selassie I (Chevannes, 1994; Homiak, 2021). Through reggae, Rastafari ideology became globally visible, promoting themes of Black liberation, anti-colonial resistance and



spiritual renewal (Daynes, 2010; Edmonds, 2003). This ideological foundation shaped reggae's reputation as a vehicle for social critique and political consciousness.

The decline of socially conscious reggae has been noted by several scholars. Francis (2016) argues that the commercialisation of reggae has contributed to a dilution of its moral and activist content, as market pressures encourage artists to prioritise popularity over message. This aligns with broader critiques of global popular music, where commercial imperatives often overshadow socio-political engagement (Negus, 1999; Mitchell, 2001). Emerging artists, driven by rapid celebrity culture and digital visibility, frequently replicate commercially successful formulas, thereby perpetuating cycles of lyrical superficiality.

In the Nigerian context, reggae once held a prominent position as a genre of resistance and social commentary. Nwabufu (2020) observes that earlier Nigerian reggae was "leavened with strong messages," but laments that younger audiences now gravitate toward "vacuous songs" in Afrobeats and Afro-hip-hop. Nigerian reggae artists such as Majek Fashek, Ras Kimono, The Mandators, and Evi Edna Ogoli used music to critique military dictatorship, corruption, and social inequality (Oikelome, 2013; Omojola, 2012). Their work aligned with reggae's global tradition of sonic activism.

However, several factors have contributed to reggae's decline in Nigeria. One is the shift in media gatekeeping. King Wadada, a Nigerian reggae musician, has publicly criticised radio and television presenters for sidelining reggae in favour of Afrobeats and hip-hop, arguing that reggae remains vital for "the emancipation of oppressed people" (Lindsay, 2019). This aligns with scholarly analyses of Nigerian media industries, which show that payola, commercial pressures, and corporate sponsorship heavily influence airplay decisions (Adebayo, 2019; Omojola, 2012).

Another factor is the rise of digital media. The advent of social media and streaming platforms has transformed music promotion, enabling artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers (Nwabueze & Ezema, 2020). This shift has disproportionately benefited Afrobeats, whose sonic aesthetics and dance-oriented appeal align well with digital virality (Adegoke, 2021). As Ayodele (2023) notes, Afrobeats' dominance has led some fans to fear that other genres, including reggae and dancehall, may "go extinct."

Dancehall, raga and galala, Nigerian derivatives of reggae, thrived between the late 1990s and early 2000s through artists such as Daddy Showkey, Marvelous Benji and Raymond King. Yet these sub-genres also declined as Afrobeats gained global traction. Scholars attribute Afrobeats' rise to its hybridised sound, which blends highlife, hip-hop, dancehall and electronic music, making it highly adaptable and internationally marketable (Adegoke, 2021; Oikelome, 2013).



The cumulative effect of these developments is a significant reduction in reggae's visibility and influence in Nigeria. As Salau (2025) notes, "the Nigerian music scene has changed," with digital platforms reshaping audience reach, promotional strategies and genre hierarchies. While reggae retains cultural significance, its activist potency has weakened, raising concerns about the diminishing role of socially conscious music in Nigeria's democratic and civic landscape.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, chosen for its suitability in exploring perceptions, experiences and contextual factors surrounding the decline of reggae music in Nigeria. Qualitative inquiry enabled direct engagement with participants and facilitated the collection of rich, descriptive data relevant to the research questions.

Data were generated through semi-structured and unstructured interviews, supported by non-intrusive observation where appropriate. Interviews served as the primary source of evidence, allowing respondents to articulate their views in their own words. The researcher also consulted published interviews with Nigerian reggae artists whose reflections aligned with the study's objectives. Complementary online searches provided additional primary and secondary materials that enriched contextual understanding.

Fieldwork was conducted in the Department of Music at Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State. The sample comprised students aged 18–25 across different academic levels, as well as ten lecturers in the department. All participants were asked to respond to questions addressing three core issues: the causes of reggae's decline in Nigeria, the effects of this development, and possible remedies. Participants were approached individually, informed of the study's purpose and assured of ethical compliance, including voluntary participation and confidentiality.

Data collection tools included an Android phone for audio recording, alongside pen and paper for note-taking. Interview responses were organised under three thematic categories: **Cause**, **Effect**, and **Remedy**. These themes guided the subsequent analysis.

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, which involved systematic reading, coding, and interpretation of interview transcripts and field notes. This approach allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns, divergent perspectives, and underlying meanings, thereby producing a coherent and analytically robust account of the findings.



Results

Following the completion of data collection, interview responses were organised into three analytical categories: **Causes**, **Effects**, and **Remedies**. The synthesis of these responses produced the following key findings.

Causes of the Decline

The findings strongly support the researcher's initial assumptions. Participants consistently identified media gatekeeping as a major factor in the decline of reggae music in Nigeria. Radio and television presenters were reported to prioritise Afrobeats during on-air programmes, thereby limiting reggae's visibility. Stations such as TVC, AIT, Naija Info FM, and OOU FM were frequently mentioned as platforms where reggae is rarely played. Even Wazobia FM in Lagos, which airs a reggae segment, restricts it to a 30-minute slot on Sunday nights, a pattern respondents described as inadequate.

Music promoters and producers were also found to encourage both emerging and established artists to adopt Afrobeats due to its global popularity and commercial profitability. This trend has contributed to the marginalisation of reggae and has led some notable Nigerian reggae artists to abandon the genre entirely, further accelerating its decline.

Effects of the Decline

A second major finding concerns listening habits. Most student respondents reported that they did not have reggae tracks stored on their mobile devices. Their playlists were dominated by Afrobeats, gospel, Islamic and highlife music. This shift in listening culture has contributed to what respondents described as the "silencing" of socially conscious musical voices within Nigeria's socio-economic and political landscape. Participants estimated that approximately 95 per cent of contemporary Nigerian artists now produce Afrobeats, leaving reggae with minimal representation.

Continued Affection but Reduced Patronage

Unexpectedly, the research revealed that many respondents still expressed genuine affection for reggae music. However, they no longer listen to it regularly on digital or physical platforms. This contradiction, valuing the genre yet not patronising it, was described by the researcher as an "anomaly," raising important questions about the disconnect between musical preference and actual listening behaviour.



Discussion

This study demonstrates that the decline of reggae music in Nigeria is driven primarily by shifts in media gatekeeping, commercial pressures and changing listener habits. This insight matters because it reveals how structural transformations within the Nigerian music ecosystem have weakened one of the country's historically significant vehicles for sonic activism, thereby reshaping the cultural space in which social critique and political consciousness once thrived.

The central research problem concerned understanding why reggae has lost prominence in Nigeria and what this decline means for society. The findings indicate that the genre's marginalisation is not simply a matter of audience preference but is embedded in broader institutional and economic dynamics. Media presenters and promoters prioritise Afrobeats because it aligns with global commercial trends, suggesting that genre visibility is increasingly determined by market logics rather than cultural or ideological value. This pattern extends existing scholarship on the commercialisation of popular music, which argues that market imperatives often dilute socially conscious artistic traditions (Negus, 1999; Mitchell, 2001). In the Nigerian context, the findings complicate Omojola's (2012) argument that popular music consistently reflects social realities, showing instead that structural constraints can suppress genres that traditionally articulate those realities.

The study also addressed the question of how reggae's decline affects Nigerian society. The results suggest that the diminishing presence of reggae has contributed to a weakening of musical activism. Historically, reggae in Nigeria served as a sonic platform for critiquing corruption, authoritarianism and inequality, echoing global traditions of reggae as a voice for the oppressed (Daynes, 2010; Edmonds, 2003). The near-absence of reggae on radio and television indicates that this activist function has been muted. This finding extends Homiak's (2021) argument that reggae's cultural power lies in its ability to mobilise collective consciousness; in Nigeria, that power appears increasingly constrained by the dominance of commercially oriented genres.

The study further explored potential remedies for reversing this trend. Participants suggested that reggae could regain relevance if media platforms diversified their playlists and if promoters supported artists beyond Afrobeats. This aligns with Barrow and Dalton's (2004) observation that reggae's survival in any context depends on sustained institutional support. However, the findings also indicate that structural change may be difficult in an environment where digital platforms reward virality and rapid consumption. The rise of social media has democratised music promotion (Nwabueze & Ezema, 2020), but it has also intensified competition, favouring genres that lend themselves to short-form, visually driven content. This dynamic challenges the slower, message-centred aesthetics of reggae.



An unexpected finding was the contradiction between respondents' stated affection for reggae and their lack of active listening. This tension suggests that nostalgia for reggae persists, but it does not translate into consumption behaviour. One interpretation is that listeners may value reggae symbolically, as a marker of cultural memory or moral authority, while gravitating toward Afrobeats for entertainment. This duality reflects broader debates in cultural studies about the gap between cultural valuation and cultural practice (Bennett, 2008). It also indicates that reggae's decline is not solely a matter of taste but is shaped by technological and social shifts that influence how music is accessed and circulated.

The study's limitations should be acknowledged. The sample was drawn from a single university department, which may not fully represent Nigeria's diverse musical publics. The reliance on self-reported listening habits may also introduce bias, as participants could understate or overstate their engagement with certain genres. These limitations do not undermine the findings but define the boundaries within which they should be interpreted. Future studies could incorporate multi-site sampling, ethnographic observation of listening practices, or digital-platform analytics to deepen understanding of genre visibility.

The implications of this study point toward several avenues for future research and practice. Scholars could investigate how digital algorithms shape genre hierarchies in Nigeria or how reggae artists adapt their activist messages to contemporary media environments. Practitioners, including broadcasters, promoters and cultural policymakers, might explore strategies for preserving socially conscious music traditions, such as dedicated programming, heritage festivals or targeted funding for reggae artists. More broadly, the findings invite reflection on how Nigeria's cultural landscape can sustain musical forms that contribute to civic awareness and democratic engagement.

Overall, this study advances scholarship by demonstrating that reggae's decline in Nigeria is not merely a cultural shift but a structural transformation with implications for musical activism, cultural memory and public discourse. It challenges assumptions that popular music naturally evolves toward more commercially viable forms, showing instead that such evolution can diminish genres that historically served as critical voices within society. In doing so, it contributes to theoretical debates on music, power and cultural change, and offers a foundation for future inquiry into the politics of genre in contemporary Africa.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the causes of the decline in reggae music appreciation in Nigeria, the effects of this trend on society, and the possible measures for reversing it. The findings reveal a clear and troubling reality: reggae has experienced a marked decline in visibility and influence within the Nigerian music landscape. Although many people still express genuine affection for the genre, their listening habits



are shaped largely by what radio and television presenters promote and by what dominates social media platforms. At present, these platforms overwhelmingly favour Afrobeats, leaving reggae with minimal exposure.

The study highlights the structural forces that shape musical consumption in Nigeria. Music presenters, DJs, promoters and digital platforms wield significant influence over what audiences hear, and their choices directly affect public perception and musical preferences. By identifying these forces, the research clarifies why reggae has lost ground and demonstrates how media and industry practices contribute to the silencing of a genre historically associated with social consciousness and activism.

The implications of these findings point to the need for collective action. Presenters, promoters, artists and musicians must be involved in efforts to restore reggae's relevance. Without such intervention, future generations of artists may continue to follow the Afrobeats trend, further diminishing reggae's presence. The study suggests that empowering reggae musicians to produce high-quality work, supported by deliberate promotional strategies, could help reposition the genre. Once strong material is available, social media platforms, now central to music distribution, can amplify it widely, enabling artists to reach audiences without relying solely on traditional media outlets. These platforms not only project music but also provide financial returns, offering new opportunities for reggae artists to thrive.

In sum, this research underscores the urgency of revitalising reggae in Nigeria and affirms that meaningful change is possible when industry stakeholders recognise their role in shaping the nation's musical future.

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