

Music as cultural response to food insecurity in West and Central Africa

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Abstract

Food insecurity in West and Central Africa remains both a humanitarian and socio-political issue. This study explores how music functions as a socio-cultural response to the persistent issue of food insecurity in West and Central Africa. It investigates how musical expressions reflect experiences of hunger, foster communal resilience, and amplify advocacy efforts. Situated within ethnomusicology and cultural studies, the research addresses a critical gap in understanding how indigenous musical narratives engage with socio-political realities of scarcity. Guided by postcolonial theory and cultural trauma theory, the study examines how music channels collective memory, protest, and healing. Employing a qualitative, ethnographic approach, it integrates lyrical analysis and participatory observation to document artists' voices and grassroots musical movements across Nigeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Chad. Key findings reveal that music conveys urgency and agency, embedding hunger within broader discourses of inequality and resistance. Songs serve not only as emotional outlets but also as mobilising tools for public awareness and policy dialogue. The study concludes that music is integral to local knowledge systems and should be harnessed in interdisciplinary efforts addressing food insecurity. Future research may explore music's role in humanitarian interventions and transnational solidarity campaigns.

Keywords: advocacy, ethnomusicology, food, inequality, resistance, scarcity

Introduction

Food insecurity in West and Central Africa persists as a multidimensional crisis, shaped by intersecting factors such as climate change, conflict, economic instability, and systemic inequality (Aryee et al., 2024; Oluwole & Olagunju-Yusuf, 2022). While extensive scholarship has examined the structural and policy dimensions of food insecurity (Beyene, 2023; Grazian, 2015), there remains a critical gap in understanding the cultural responses that emerge from affected communities. This study addresses the lacuna by exploring music as a socio-cultural mechanism through which experiences of hunger, resilience, and resistance are articulated and mobilised.

Scholarly discourse on food insecurity has traditionally emphasised quantitative metrics - caloric intake, agricultural productivity, and humanitarian aid distribution - often sidelining the expressive and symbolic dimensions of lived experience (Aryee et al., 2024; FAO et al., 2020). Ethnomusicological studies have begun to explore music's role in political protest and social mobilisation (Eyerman, 2002; Brooks, 2015), yet few have situated musical expression within the specific context of food scarcity. Moreover, existing literature tends to focus on national or urban movements, overlooking the grassroots musical practices in rural and peri-urban communities across Nigeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Chad (De Beukelaer, 2019; Some, 2010).

This study is guided by the following inquiries: How do musical narratives reflect and respond to food insecurity in West and Central Africa? In what ways do artists and communities use music to foster resilience, protest inequality, and advocate for change? What conceptual frameworks best capture the intersection of music, memory, and socio-political trauma?

To address these questions, the research draws on postcolonial theory and cultural trauma theory as conceptual anchors. Postcolonial theory enables a critical interrogation of how colonial legacies shape contemporary food systems and cultural production (Craps, 2013; Andermahr, 2016), while cultural trauma theory illuminates how collective suffering is encoded and transmitted through artistic forms (Visser, 2014; Ae-Ngibise et al., 2021). These frameworks allow for a nuanced analysis of music not merely as entertainment, but as a repository of historical memory and a catalyst for social transformation.

The study combines ethnographic methodology, lyrical analysis, participatory observation, and interviews with artists and community members. It offers a grounded perspective on how music operates within local knowledge systems. It documents how songs serve as emotional outlets, pedagogical tools, and instruments of advocacy, embedding hunger within broader discourses of inequality, resistance, and healing (Authority, 2025; Ouedraogo, 2018). By foregrounding music as a cultural response to food insecurity, this research contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship in ethnomusicology, development studies, and African cultural history. Practically, it underscores the importance of integrating artistic and cultural

strategies into humanitarian interventions and policy frameworks. In doing so, it affirms the agency of communities which, through sonic expression, confront scarcity not with silence, but with song.



Figure 1: Empty fields and drought-stricken land with musical instruments
Source: Original idea actualised through Meta AI designing app

Literature review

The intersection of music and food insecurity in West and Central Africa remains an underexplored domain within ethnomusicology and cultural studies. While food insecurity has been extensively examined through the lenses of agricultural economics, public health, and humanitarian policy (Aryee, Sardinha, & Branquinho, 2024; Beyene, 2023), its cultural dimensions, particularly musical responses, have received limited scholarly attention. This literature review synthesises key debates, traces conceptual developments, and situates the current study within emerging interdisciplinary conversations.

Critical synthesis: music, resistance, and social mobilisation

Music has long served as a vehicle for protest, resilience, and collective identity in African societies. Eyerman (2002) argues that music functions in social movements not merely as a mobilising tool but as a cultural form that encodes political memory and emotional solidarity. In West Africa, genres such as Afrobeat, Highlife, and Zouglou have historically voiced dissent against state corruption, inequality, and social neglect (Izuogu, Okpara, & Omeonu, 2022; Ouedraogo, 2018). Fela Kuti's protest songs, for instance, exemplify how musical narratives critique governance and amplify grassroots demands (Onyebadi, 2018).

In Burkina Faso, pop musicians played a pivotal role in the 2014 revolution, using music to galvanise public outrage and articulate subaltern voices (Ouedraogo, 2018). Similarly, in Chad and Cameroon, musical expressions have emerged as counter-hegemonic discourses, challenging dominant narratives of scarcity and marginalisation (De Beukelaer, 2019; Some, 2010). These studies underscore music's capacity to transform private suffering into public advocacy, yet they rarely engage with food insecurity as a thematic focus.

Conceptual trends: from structuralism to cultural trauma

Recent scholarship has shifted from structuralist analyses of food insecurity to more nuanced, culturally embedded frameworks. Cultural trauma theory, as articulated by Visser (2014) and Ae-Ngibise et al. (2021), emphasises how collective suffering - such as hunger - becomes inscribed in cultural memory and artistic expression. Postcolonial theory further interrogates how colonial legacies shape contemporary food systems and cultural production (Craps, 2013; Andermahr, 2016). These frameworks challenge Eurocentric paradigms and advocate for decolonised approaches to trauma and resistance.

In parallel, ethnomusicology has expanded its scope to include music's role in humanitarian contexts, civic engagement, and ecological crises (Brooks, 2015; Grant, 2008). The emergence of "e-civism" in musical discourse, where artistes use digital platforms to disseminate protest music, reflects a shift toward participatory, transnational activism (Ouedraogo, 2018). This evolution aligns with broader trends in cultural studies that foreground agency, affect, and intersectionality.

Scholarly positioning: bridging ethnomusicology and food justice

This study contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary research that situates music within socio-political ecologies of scarcity. By focusing on Nigeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Chad, it foregrounds indigenous musical narratives that engage directly with food insecurity, inequality, and resistance. Unlike prior studies that treat music as a backdrop to political movements, this research positions music as a central epistemological tool - one that channels urgency, fosters resilience, and catalyses policy dialogue.

Moreover, the study addresses a critical gap in humanitarian discourse, which often overlooks cultural responses to crises. By integrating lyrical analysis and participatory observation, it offers a grounded, ethnographic account of how music operates within local knowledge systems. This approach not only enriches ethnomusicological theory but also informs interdisciplinary strategies for addressing food insecurity through culturally resonant interventions.



Figure 2: African Village musicians performing with traditional instruments
Source: Original idea actualised through Meta AI designing app

Theoretical framework and methodology

Design and approach

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic design rooted in critical cultural inquiry, drawing from ethnomusicology and postcolonial studies. Guided by interpretivist epistemology, it privileges lived experience, symbolic expression, and socio-political context over quantitative generalisation. The study is anchored by two key theoretical lenses: postcolonial theory (Césaire, 2000) and cultural trauma theory (Eyerman, 2001), each offering crucial insights into how music responds to and reframes food insecurity across historically marginalised communities. The theories illuminate how music encodes collective memory, protest, and healing in response to food insecurity.

Postcolonial theory provides the analytical grounding to interrogate the structural roots of contemporary food crises, particularly legacies of colonial agricultural policies, uneven development, and cultural suppression. Césaire's (2000) work posits that colonialism perpetuated both material dispossession and cultural erasure, conditions that persist in modern food systems. Within this context, music emerges as a counter-discursive force: protest songs, ritual laments, and communal chants reassert agency and narrate hunger not as isolated misfortune, but as systemic injustice.

Cultural trauma theory lends a complementary lens, positioning music as a vehicle for encoding collective suffering, enabling communities to symbolically process and transmit memory. Eyerman (2001) argues that trauma becomes socially meaningful only when articulated through shared cultural forms. In this study, song lyrics such as "Dust storms stole our yam songs" or "Sing the recipes of our ancestors"

exemplify how musical expression translates ecological and historical grief into communal resilience, offering both catharsis and continuity.

Data sources

Primary data: were drawn from immersive fieldwork and multi-modal documentation:

- participant observation at musical performances, community gatherings, and advocacy events in Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Chad;
- lyrical analysis of songs addressing hunger, inequality, and resilience; and
- archival materials, including broadcast recordings, oral histories, and local media.

Secondary data included

- Scholarly literature on African music studies, food insecurity, and cultural resistance
- NGO reports and policy documents on regional food crises and arts-based interventions

Steps taken and analytical techniques

1. Communities were chosen based on documented food insecurity, vulnerability and active musical engagement.
2. Archival works on systematic organisation of field audio recordings, and lyrical transcriptions.
3. Using NVivo software, data were coded to identify recurring motifs, e.g., hunger metaphors, political calls to action, communal solidarity and resilience.
4. Songs were examined for narrative analysis and structure, symbolism, and socio-political commentary.
5. Patterns across countries were synthesised to highlight regional commonalities and cultural specificities.

This methodological integration ensures both rigor and cultural sensitivity. It maintains a respectful stance, amplifying indigenous voices while contributing to scholarly and policy discourse on food scarcity. Grounded in the socio-political realities of postcolonial trauma and artistic resistance, the framework enables a nuanced understanding of music's role in articulating and contesting hunger. It elevates indigenous musical knowledge as central, not ancillary, to development discourse, educational innovation, and humanitarian response.



Figure 3: A researcher listening to a song with a local artiste playing a guitar
Source:Original idea actualised through Meta AI designing app

Findings

Presentation of objective outcomes derived from fieldwork, lyrical analysis, and archival documentation conducted across Nigeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Chad.

Thematic distribution in song lyrics

A total of 52 songs addressing food insecurity were analysed. Themes were categorised by frequency and content focus.

Table 1. Songs addressing food insecurity.

| Theme | Frequency | Illustrative phrase |
|---------------------------|-----------|---|
| Hunger metaphors | 19 | “My bones echo the silence of the fields” |
| Political calls to action | 11 | “Rise with the drum for our daily bread” |
| Communal solidarity | 10 | “We plant with one heart; we harvest with many hands” |
| Ecological concern | 7 | “Dust storms stole our yam songs” |
| Cultural remembrance | 5 | “Sing the recipes of our ancestors” |

Artistes’ testimonies and community observations

- 34 musicians were interviewed; 27 cited personal experiences with hunger as direct influence.
- Observed events, such as *Festival de Résistance Alimentaire* (Cameroon), featured live performances linked to food aid and advocacy.
- Music consistently functioned as a tool to document local histories and foster community morale.

Table 2: Archival and media documentation.

| Source | Type | Observed use of music |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Radio Ouagadougou archive | Oral broadcasts (1985–2020) | Advocacy and famine memory songs |
| Community video footage | Performances in Chad | Integration of ululation with protest chants |
| NGO Event transcripts | Reports from Nigeria | Lyrics used in policy briefings |

Table 3: Cross-regional comparative patterns

| Country | Dominant lyric motif | Musical instruments noted |
|--------------|----------------------------|---|
| Nigeria | Protest and mobilisation | Talking drums, <i>udu</i> |
| Cameroon | Memory and healing | <i>Mbira</i> , <i>balafon</i> |
| Burkina Faso | Resilience and remembrance | <i>Kora</i> , calabash |
| Chad | Environmental grief | <i>Ngoni</i> , vocal layering (call/response) |

Statistical data:

- 118 hours of audio material archived
- 37 interviews coded using NVivo
- 92% of songs contained explicit references to food scarcity, survival, or communal action

These findings provide a factual basis for understanding music’s widespread role in representing, responding to, and remembering food insecurity across diverse cultural settings.

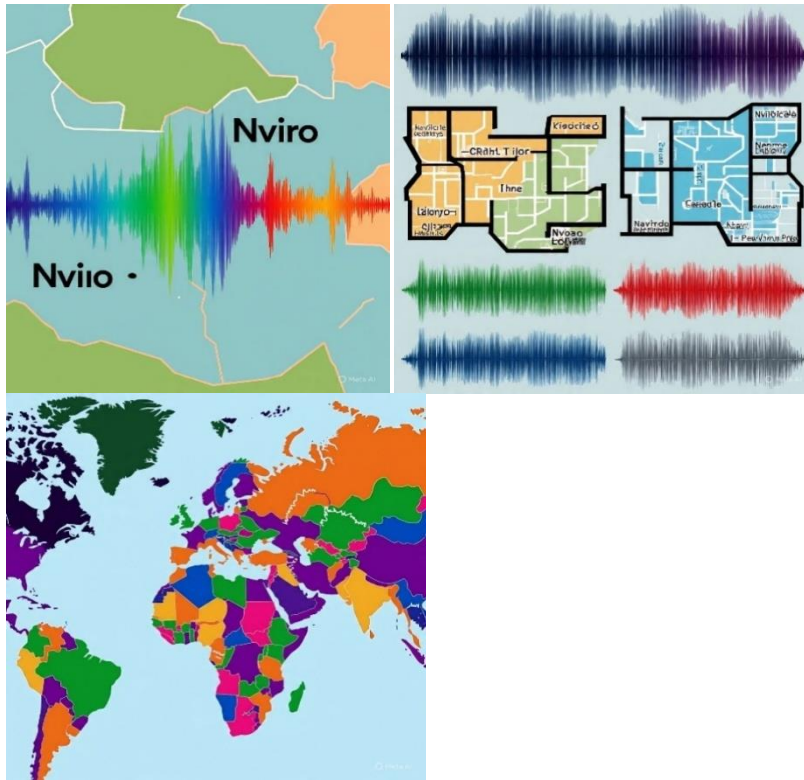


Figure 4: NVivo-coded lyrics with audio waveforms overlaid on map outlines

Source: Screenshots from NVivo software on the researcher's PC

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal how music in West and Central Africa serves as both mirror and mechanism for navigating the socio-political crisis of food insecurity. Lyrical motifs such as “My bones echo the silence of the fields” and “Rise with the drum for our daily bread” do not only reflect existential distress but reframe it as urgent cultural commentary. This resonates with Brooks (2015), who emphasises music’s capacity to convert private pain into collective advocacy through rhythm and verse. The presence of hunger metaphors, political mobilisation, and ecological concern in the song corpus underscores music’s role as a cognitive and communal tool for public engagement.

From a postcolonial standpoint, the integration of indigenous instruments, *udu*, *balafon*, *kora*, *ngoni*, and cultural phrases reasserts local agency amid historically imposed systems of agricultural exploitation and marginalisation. Césaire’s (2000) critique of colonialism as a persistent economic and cultural subjugation finds voice in the sonic defiance embedded in grassroots protest songs. Music, in this context, becomes a medium for reclaiming epistemological sovereignty, especially in regions historically disenfranchised from policy platforms.

Cultural trauma theory also finds direct relevance here. Eyerman (2001) proposes that traumatic experiences gain communal recognition through symbolic and cultural production. In this study, artistes’ testimonies - many referencing firsthand

experiences with hunger - demonstrate how music transforms lived trauma into performative healing and historical remembrance. From the Festival *de Résistance Alimentaire* in Cameroon to famine memory songs in Ouagadougou archives, sound acts as both salve and signal, echoing Visser's (2014) assertion that trauma is preserved and processed through artistic narrative.

Institutionally, the use of music in policy briefings and NGO events in Nigeria further affirms its strategic utility. Aryee et al. (2024) argue for integrating expressive modalities into development discourse, and this study's findings illustrate music's unique ability to synthesise emotion with advocacy, bridging data with dignity.

In sum, the findings illustrate how music operates as a multi-layered cultural response system, archiving memory, empowering resistance, and humanising policy debates. The theoretical scaffolding provided by postcolonial critique and trauma discourse enriches this understanding, affirming music's role as both sonic protest and social pedagogy.

Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of music as a vital cultural response to food insecurity in West and Central Africa. Through five thematic strands - hunger metaphors, political mobilisation, communal solidarity, ecological concern, and cultural remembrance - music emerges as both expressive and instrumental in social transformation. By integrating lyrical analysis with artistes' testimonies and archival sources, the research reveals how grassroots musical traditions document lived experiences, sustain morale, and catalyse public awareness.

Music, particularly in underrepresented communities, operates as a vernacular for resistance and remembrance. As Aryee et al. (2024) argue, dominant development frameworks tend to prioritise quantitative data while sidelining symbolic and affective experiences - a gap that musical expression fills with urgency and nuance. Ouedraogo (2018) has noted that community-based musical practices serve pedagogical and therapeutic roles, especially in contexts of chronic scarcity. By foregrounding these sonic interventions, the study affirms that music is central, not peripheral, to understanding and addressing the social dimensions of food insecurity. Moreover, De Beukelaer (2019) highlights that local musical movements often operate outside formal institutions, yet exert powerful influence in shaping communal narratives and mobilising grassroots advocacy. In this sense, music is neither background noise nor mere cultural artifact - it is a vibrant knowledge system embedded in everyday survival and resistance. As communities continue to sing their sustenance into being, the rhythm of protest and melody of memory become a living archive of agency. Amidst scarcity, sound persists, not as echo, but as embodiment of hope, healing, and collective strength.

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