The role of highlife music in fostering national unity and nation-building in post-war Nigeria (1970–1990)

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Abstract

The end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 marked a critical period in the country's socio-political evolution, during which the rebuilding of national unity and the fostering of a collective identity were prioritised. By means of a critical discourse analysis of Highlife lyrics and a historical appraisal of the genre's impact in Nigeria, the role of Highlife music as a cultural agent in the processes of national reconciliation and nation-building during the post-war era is investigated in this study. The study reveals that Highlife was not only employed as a tool for entertainment, but was also utilised as a socio-political instrument through which ethnic divides were bridged, collective national identity reinforced. Through multilingual lyrics, regionally inclusive styles, and accessible rhythms, significant contributions were made by Highlife music to the fostering of unity among Nigeria's diverse ethnic communities. Fresh insight is provided by this study into the ways in which indigenous music can be employed as a vehicle for cultural healing, policy formation, and identity consolidation in post-conflict settings. The findings underscore the need for greater recognition to be given to music's capacity to support national development and cohesion in transitional societies.

Key words: cultural identity, highlife, nation-building, post-war Nigeria, national unity

Introduction

The end of the Nigerian Civil War in January 1970 ushered in a pivotal moment in the nation's history. With the military declaring "no victor, no vanquished," the Federal Government was left with the herculean task of reunifying a country shattered by war and ethnic division. Nation-building became a central priority, and while political strategies and economic reconstruction took the front seat, cultural interventions, particularly music, played a less-visible but equally crucial role. One such cultural force was Highlife music, a genre that had already established deep roots in the Nigerian social and musical landscape by the 1960s.

Originating as a blend of indigenous musical traditions and Western instrumental elements, Highlife was evolved into a medium for social expression and interethnic dialogue. By the post-war period, the genre had been widely embraced across ethnic lines, and a shared cultural space for healing and collective identity formation was offered. The influence of Highlife music in the aftermath of the war is explored in this study, with specific attention given to its contributions to nation-building and unity from 1970 to 1990.

Within these intangible expressions, music is accorded a unique position as both a transmitter and repository of cultural values. In a diverse and multi-ethnic nation such as Nigeria, where tensions and divisions have frequently resulted in violence, the fostering of social cohesion and shared meaning has been enabled through music. Highlife music, particularly in the two decades following the war, is argued in this paper to have functioned not merely as entertainment but as a vehicle for unity, peace-building, and nation-building.

The origins and evolution of Highlife music

The historical development of Highlife music reflects the complexity of African cultural expression. Emerging in the early 20th century from coastal West African cities such as Accra and Lagos, Highlife fused traditional African rhythms with Western instruments like brass, guitars, and pianos. Its name which was coined from the exclusive ballroom dance culture of colonial elites came to represent a democratised sound embraced by the masses.

Scholars like Emielu (2009) and Collins (1992) note that Highlife's roots lie in both indigenous recreational music and military brass bands introduced during colonial rule. Over time, the genre absorbed styles such as Adaha, Agidigbo, Asiko, and Gumbey, forming a rich cultural mosaic. In Nigeria, Highlife adapted to local preferences, producing regional variants like Igbo Highlife, Bini Highlife, and Yoruba-influenced forms. These variations reflected not only musical creativity but also the genre’s capacity to capture a shared Nigerian experience. Musicians such as E.T. Mensah, Victor Olaiya, and Bobby Benson were instrumental in popularizing Highlife across ethnic and national boundaries. By the 1950s and 1960s, the genre had gained momentum as the musical language of urban Nigeria. However, it was in

the post-war era (between 1970 and 1990) that Highlife fully assumed its role as a tool for nation-building.

Highlife music genre in Nigeria

Nigeria, a country with over 250 ethnic groups and a rich cultural heritage, has long been regarded as a melting pot of diverse musical traditions. Among the many genres that have emerged from this cultural crucible, Highlife music is identified as a unifying force through which ethnic and regional divides are bridged. In view of Nigeria's rich cultural tapestry and ethnic diversity, the classification of Highlife music is required to be approached from a multifaceted perspective. This approach is understood to involve the recognition and accommodation of regional and ethnic variations that reflect the distinctive characteristics of different areas and communities.

The creative freedom exercised by individual Highlife musicians is also to be taken into consideration, as their individual styles and forms of interpretations are seen to contribute to the genre's complexity. By acknowledging these variations, a more inclusive understanding of Highlife music that does justice to its multifaceted nature can be developed. As was duly pointed out by Miller (1984), the diversity and complexity of a society are directly reflected in the number and variety of genres that emerge within it. When this insight is applied to the Nigerian context, it becomes evident that the country's remarkable ethnic complexity and cultural diversity must be carefully considered in the categorisation of Highlife musical genres. In other words, the rich cultural landscape of Nigeria comprising numerous ethnic groups with distinct traditions and musical styles necessitates the adoption of a classification system in which these differences are adequately acknowledged and accommodated. By the consideration of the country's cultural diversity, a more detailed and accurate understanding of Highlife music and its sub-genres can be achieved.

According to Ajayi (2017), Vidal provided insight into the definitions of Highlife and Juju music in an interview, highlighting their interconnected yet distinct nature. Vidal characterised Highlife music as a genre that features instrumental elements as the primary focus, accompanied by vocals, whereas Juju music is centred on vocal performances, supported by instrumental accompaniment. This perspective suggests that Highlife and Juju music can be seen as complementary or interchangeable in some respects, with the main difference lying in the balance between instrumental and vocal components. Vidal's definitions underscore the urban popular music roots of both genres while emphasising their unique characteristics.

Vidal further characterised Highlife music as a style specifically designed for dance, drawing parallels with Western ballroom dance. He noted that Highlife music inherited certain formalities from ballroom dance, such as the expectation of dancing with a partner. According to Vidal, the traditional Highlife dance setting requires a level of formality, with both men and women dressing elegantly - men in fitted attire and women in evening dresses, often complemented by hats. A key aspect of this

dance tradition is the pairing of partners, meaning that dancing alone is generally not permitted. Vidal added that if someone arrived without a partner, they could approach a well-dressed lady and ask her to dance, essentially using her as a "gate pass" to gain access to the dance floor. This underscores the social and structured nature of Highlife dance, emphasising partnership and decorum.

According to Collins (1992), E. T. Mensah as he is known, was born in Accra in 1919. It was his band, the Tempos, that pioneered urban highlife played by dance-bands. He started his musical career when as a small boy, he joined the Accra orchestra as a flute player. The Accra Orchestra was formed by Teacher Lamptey around 1930, based on a schoolboy band. E.T. Mensah and his older brother, Yebuah, went on to form their own Accra Rhythmic Orchestra, which won the Lambeth Walk Dance Competition in 1939 at the King George Memorial Hall. Yebuah Mensah comments on the Origin of the term “Highlife”:

During the early twenties, during my childhood, the term “highlife” was created by people who gathered around the dancing clubs such as the Rodger club (built in 1904) to watch and listen to couples enjoying themselves. Highlife started as a catch-name for the indigenous songs played at these clubs by such early bands as the Jazz kings, the Cape Coast Sugar Babies, the Sekondi Nanshamang, and later the Accra Orchestra. The people outside called it “highlife” as they did not reach the class of the couples going inside who not only had to pay relatively high entrance fee, but also had to wear full evening dress including top-hats.

As noted by Collins (1992), Nigeria became a major centre for highlife music because it has recording facilities. In the 1950s, it was highlife dance band music, introduced to the country by the Ghanaian Tempos band of E. T. Mensah and copied by musician on Lagos, such as Victor Olaiya, Bobby Benson, and E. C. Arinze. Guitar-band music was around, submerged in the commercial music scene. In the late 1960s, everything changed because of the Nigerian civil war. Many of the dance-bands, led by Nigerians from the East collapsed, like those of Charles Iwuegbue, Enyang Henshaw, Zeal Onyia, E. C. Arinze, and Rex Lawson. The field was left open for the guitar-bands, which surfaced as a dominant force. In the western part of Nigeria, this guitar-band music was juju music; in the mid-west, it was Bini highlife; and in the east it was Igbo high life. Victor Uwaifo’s music (an international version of the highlife music of the Bendel State) is in fact a sophisticated variation on the local native blues. These and many more are regional and ethnic variations of highlife music that reflect the unique characteristics of different areas and communities.

The role of Highlife music in post-war nation-building in Nigeria

Highlife music played a significant role in engendering post-war unity and nation-building in Nigeria in a number of wars.

Transcending ethnic boundaries

Highlife music's hybrid structure allowed it to transcend narrow ethnic boundaries. Artistes such as Rex Lawson and Osita Osadebe sang in multiple languages, making their music accessible to people across Nigeria. The genre's non-tribal sound and inclusive thematic content often centred on peace, love, and cooperation and resonated in a country recovering from inter-ethnic conflict.

Highlife thus provided a neutral ground where different ethnic identities could coexist, listen, and dance together. The genre became a unifying force in public spaces, from radio stations to beer parlours and national festivals, reducing the cultural tension that lingered after the war.

Shared cultural experience and social integration

During the 1970s and 1980s, Highlife functioned as a cultural meeting point. The genre was a staple at weddings, naming ceremonies, political events, and public rallies. These gatherings became venues for communal interaction, with Highlife as the soundtrack of unity. Musicians often performed at state functions, reinforcing the music's national significance.

The FESTAC '77 festival underscored Highlife's centrality to Nigeria's post-war cultural diplomacy. Performers like Victor Uwaifo blended traditional Bini musical motifs with cosmopolitan Highlife arrangements, presenting a sound that was both local and national.

Linguistic accessibility

Highlife music embraced Nigeria's multilingual context by fusing English, pidgin, and native languages in its lyrics. This multilingualism democratised access to the music and ensured that no ethnic group felt excluded. Songs like Victor Olaiya's "New Nigeria" featured lines that named various ethnic groups, symbolically stitching them together under a common national identity while highlighting the ideal of unity in diversity. The following are the song lyrics of the *New Nigeria* song by Victor Olaiya:

Intro
New Nigeria!!!

Verse
New Nigeria (yeaaa)
One Nigeria (yeaa)
General Gowon, united we shall stand
Ibos o(yeaaa), Hausas ay (yeaaa), Yorubas o
(United we shall stand)

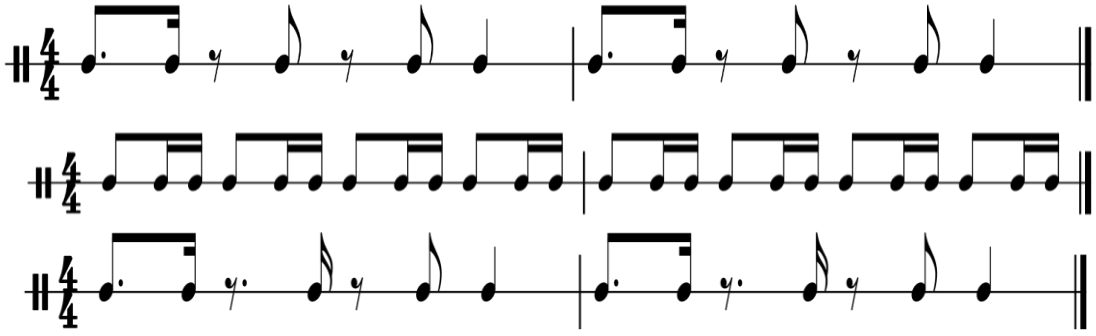
Chorus
By the grace of almighty God
Our brothers are back with us

New Nigeria
United we shall stand
By the grace of Almighty God
Twelve states have come to stay
New Nigeria!
United we shall stand

Verse
Ijaws o (yeaaa), Fulanis ay (yeaa) Edos o
United we shall stand
Efiks o (aaaa), Urhobos (yeaaa) Ifon e
United we shall stand

Dance, rhythm, and social bonding
Highlife music's association with formal dance and social events brought people together, fostering social interaction and a sense of community. The symbiotic relationship between Highlife music and dance and social gatherings facilitated a convergence of individuals, thereby cultivating an environment conducive to social interaction and communal bonding. Notwithstanding the existence of diverse ethnic and regional variants within highlife music genre, the underlying rhythmic pattern exhibits a remarkable consistency, thereby serving as a unifying thread that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries.

A pivotal role has been played by this shared collective musical heritage in the ensuring collective identity, by which the divides in Nigeria's multifaceted cultures have been bridged. Due to its trans-cultural appeal, Highlife music has been deemed as an element for social-cultural integration, by which meanings are made across disparate groups and exchanges facilitated accordingly. The ability of the genre to transcend ethnic and regional boundaries has been seen to contribute significantly to the creation of a shared cultural space that reflects the complexities and richness of Nigerian cultural identity.



Highlife rhythmic patterns

Constructing national identity

Highlife music served as a cultural mirror, reflecting Nigeria's complex identity. It addressed national issues of war, corruption, leadership, and development, while also celebrating everyday life. The music of Sunny Ade, Ebenezer Obey, and Chris Ajilo combined social critique with hope, echoing the aspirations of a post-war generation. More importantly, Highlife constructed a sonic narrative of "One Nigeria", reinforcing official policies while adding cultural legitimacy to the unity project. The genre complemented the government's political messaging with emotionally resonant expressions of nationhood.

Legacy and influence on contemporary genres

Highlife laid the groundwork for the emergence of later genres like Afrobeat and Afrobeats. Fela Kuti's early sound was heavily influenced by Highlife, and musicians of later years like Flavour, The Cavemen, and Tekno have revived Highlife elements in contemporary pop.

The enduring appeal of Highlife across decades speaks to its cultural flexibility and symbolic power. Its contribution to Nigeria's post-war unity and ongoing cultural evolution confirms its central role in the nation's history.

Conclusion

Between 1970 and 1990, Highlife music was not only a soundtrack to Nigeria's daily life but also a cultural instrument for nation-building. By crossing ethnic lines, promoting shared experiences, and crafting inclusive messages, Highlife helped heal the wounds of war and inspired a generation to imagine a united Nigeria.

Its rhythm, lyrics, and symbolism fostered collective identity and social bonding in a way that politics alone could not. As Nigeria continues to struggle with issues of division and disunity, the example of Highlife's integrative power remains relevant. Music, when embraced as a tool of cultural policy, holds potential not just for entertainment but for building bridges in fractured societies.

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