

AFROBEATS GENRE AND ITS ROLE IN REBRANDING NIGERIAN NATION

Tekena Jack

Department of Music
University of Port Harcourt
E-mail: tekcon90@gmail.com

&

Rita Adaobi Sunday-Kanu, PhD

Department of Music
University of Port Harcourt
E-mail: rita.sunday-kanu@uniport.edu.ng

Abstract

Global popularity of Afrobeats and its inextricable link to Nigerian roots has recently brought Nigerian nation into a new limelight of discourse. Afrobeats is a genre of music that deals with fusion of African traditional music, jazz, funk and rock music. It is the most accepted African musical culture in the global music scene and it is very popular in Nigeria. Afrobeats has begun to revive a sense of nationalism and Pan-Africanism within Nigeria and African continent. This trend has redefined Nigerians both at home and in the diaspora. Afrobeats musicians have succeeded in re-presenting Nigeria to the world in the past three decades. This study explores Nigerian Afrobeats musical genre and its role in rebranding Nigeria's national image. Focus is on the 'ambassadors' of Afrobeats who are non-state actors in the constructivist framework of international relations yet, they have achieved considerable success in promoting Nigeria's national image where state actors have failed to achieve success. Method used for data collection includes observation, media reports, internet sources, interview and review of related archival literature. Findings from the study indicate that through Afrobeats, Nigeria has regained her alliances, treaties and partnership with other nations of the world. Afrobeat musicians have made remarkable shift in boosting national image, perception and self esteem of Nigerians around the globe.

Introduction

Nigeria as a nation has been humiliated in diverse ways due to the corrupt attributes of her political leaders. In diverse media clips from around the world, Nigeria has been popularized by the single story of her corrupt politicians and their manipulative political tools such as, tribalism, religious fanaticism, terrorism and banditry. One of such derogatory representation of Nigerian image was seen in one of the viral video clip in 2016 where the former British Prime Minister, David Cameron addressed Nigeria as a "fantastically corrupt" nation in his report to her majesty, Queen Elizabeth II; former queen of the United Kingdom (BBC, 2016). Such an unguarded assertion from highly respected individual like British statesman resonated widespread of negative perception of Nigeria and Nigerians in the international community. (Adeniyi, 2012). Again, the activities of Boko Haram (a militant group) in the Northeastern Nigeria have led to humanitarian crises following their brutal attacks, kidnapping and bombings of innocent citizens. Different media reports in Nigeria and beyond have highlighted the dreadful impact of Boko Haram activities in communities within Northern Nigeria. Hence, some other militant groups have gradually sprung up in different states of the country which portrays negative side of the nation in media reports. Ewonor & Abubakar (2025, January 24) that 'Nigeria's authorities have officially declared the Lakurawa armed group- which flogs people for listening to music- terrorist organization and banned it across the nation.

The Nigerian political class in all their policies has not in any way, been able to contribute significant measures to salvage the image of nation. Rather, their persistent corrupt practices which impoverish Nigerian citizens have turned Nigerians to perpetual migrants to the other parts of the world for survival. Yet, even in the diaspora, Nigeria as a nation has become a stigma to her citizen. Following the Corruption Perception Index rating as recorded by Transparency International from 2016 to 2022, Nigeria has remained among the worst ranked in terms of transparent leadership as shown in the table below.

Year	Score (lower score = worse performance)	Global rank/176 countries (Larger number = worse ranking)
2016	28	136
2017	27	148
2018	27	144
2019	26	146
2020	25	149
2021	24	154
2022	24	150

Nigeria’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2016 to 2022. (Transparency International, 2023)

It is obvious that over three decades, Nigeria's national image has been tainted by widespread of corruption, insecurity, terrorism and fraud, following the activities and policies of political leaders. Owuamanam & Agbaenyi (2021) note that this negative perception of Nigeria's national image is an indication that Nigeria ‘lacks respect, influence and prestige among the comity of nations’ (102). They believe that national image presentation is within the ambit of political and diplomatic actions and processes. It is ironic, however, that despite several direct political and diplomatic actions and policies undertaken by Nigerian governmental agencies such as the War Against Indiscipline and MAMSER (Mass Mobilization for Self Reliance, Zero Justice, and Economic Recovery) yet, no significant success has been observed in all attempts to rebranding Nigerian image through policy makers and their politicians. (Ojo &Aghedo, 2013). However, the rebranding has suddenly started creeping in through civil attributes of many Nigerian elites at home and in the diaspora who have portrayed themselves and Nigeria in a different light. This is observable in various professional fields of endeavors and careers. Such include, medical records, economic gurus, academic endeavours, engineering skill, creative arts and cultural projections in which Nigerian music artistes particularly, Afrobeats singers have made great impact in presenting Nigeria to the world.

Emergence of Afrobeats: a multicultural musical projection

Afrobeats genre was developed in the 1960s and 1970s, sprouting from the combination of western pop musical elements and West African musical styles like folk, highlife and juju music. The term “Afrobeats” was coined following a radio show in London known as ‘Afrobeats with Abrantee’. Abarantee was a popular London disc jockey (DJ). D.J Abrantee used the term Afrobeats as an umbrella name for the various genres of West African music styles that played on the radio show (Bantunauts, 2023). Afrobeats is a multicultural musical phenomenon that comprises of Ghanaian musical sounds like hiplife and banku, Nigerian sounds such as highlife and juju music, various musical elements from traditional West African music and African American musical genres like funk, jazz, R&B, hip hop, among others. The Afrobeats style of music is of unique quality with distinctive polyrhythmic nature (Okafor, 2019). Bantunauts (2023) submits that Afrobeats is an amalgam of the popular music originating out of Nigerian and Ghanaian sounds since the mid-2000.

In recent time, all these genres; banku, highlife, hiplife, afro juju, afro pop, afro hip-hop, afro fusion, have been subsumed under the umbrella name ‘ Afrobeats’. It has become obvious that the term Afrobeats represents the perception of popular West African music, particularly, Nigerian musical style. Afrobeat has become a convenient term preferred by the West to describe the stream of West African music styles that has attracted global audience (Osiebe, 2022). Indeed, one can argue that the recent global reception of Afrobeats is due to its regular performances at the world-class entertainment venues like O2 Arena, and the participation of Afrobeats artistes in the global music awards like, Grammy award, the Billboard music awards. Goffman (2010) notes that, ‘each blends African and European musical ideas, always with a strong rhythmic element. They are at first looked down upon as strange, ugly, not really music. Yet repeatedly, they break through the boundaries in which they originated, moving into mainstream America and, ultimately, dispersing around the globe’ (p. 1).

Afrobeat and Afrobeats: the Difference of ‘s’

The term ‘Afrobeats’ appear similarly to ‘Afrobeat’ but they are not exactly the same in the context of this study. The differentiation by ‘s’ makes all the difference in the two genres of music even though, they are both of West

African musical style. The relationship between both genres of music is one that is subject to numerous debates. Various studies have analysed several points of convergence and departure between Afrobeat and Afrobeats. While some believe that Afrobeats evolved from Afrobeat, they both centre on different themes and motives in the Nigerian context. Historically, Afrobeat existed first as an antagonistic drive against Nigerian political class. Its texts were primarily aimed at unveiling the corrupt practices of the government and attack on all perceived bad policies that unleash hardship on the Nigerian citizens. Afrobeat sensitizes the people on the actions and inactions of the ruling class while calling for resistance. It is political motivated music but, only a few musicians could stand government pressures to stop them. According to Dosunmu (2010), Afrobeat exists in line with Kuti's tenacious belief that music is a weapon. Olorunyomi (2013) notes that Afrobeat is a cultural and political musical practice, "an aesthetics of cultural politics". This is amply demonstrated in the highly satirical, dissident and dry humoured lyrics of the genre, the performance of which served as caustic socio-political commentaries censuring the political climate of the day (Rens, 2021).

Following the historic account of Afrobeat origin, Fela Kuti has become unavoidable name in the discourse of Afrobeat music style in Nigeria. Being a fervid political activist, Fela Kuti was born by one of the most notable female political activists in the history of Nigeria. Fela Kuti poured his political vision into his music, his grip on the genre ultimately influenced its stylistic and ideological direction (Dosunmu, 2010). On the other hand, Afrobeats was believed to be one of the genres that sprang out from Afrobeat style but, with its compositions actively avoids political themes and advocacy. Afrobeats rhythm and textual contents are such that evoke positive feelings on the citizens. It is built around self worth, self happiness, sexuality and romance, irrespective of political state of the nation. Afrobeats focuses on light-hearted entertainment and "party vibes" rather providing its listeners a form of reprieve from the chaotic socio-political and strenuous economic state of the country (Onafowokan, 2020). This genre deposits the feeling of looking beyond Nigeria as a nation but, seeing oneself as a global citizen. Finney (2018) posits a parent-child relationship between both genres, while Olorunyomi (2013) perceives Afrobeats as a stylistic evolution of Afrobeat. He believes that while Afrobeat derives its inspiration from the socio-political occurrences, Afrobeats on the other hand is motivated by socio-cultural phenomenon. Afrobeat explicitly reveals the socio-political ills, and incites its listeners to respond to the national political dilemma. However, Afrobeats rather serves its listeners as an entertainment to distract their minds from the state of the nation; it provides an escape route from obsessions over the harsh economic and frantic socio-political landscape of the country. Several critics have noted how this antithetical relationship is a discredit to Afrobeats. Olaleye & Osuagwu (2020) question the moral and political relevance of Afrobeats due to the often banal lyrical content of the music genre. However, Afrobeats artistes have distanced their music from raging political issues, which can make them become enemies with the government and motivating sober or sad reflections in their music.

History had it that Afrobeat is a genre of music pioneered by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti in the late 60s. It is a blend of highlife, funk and jazz (all three of which Fela had experimented in his music career) with traditional African music forms, fostering a novel sound that eventually gained international prominence (Rens, 2021). With Femi Kuti, Fela's son, Afrobeat earned global recognition, Femi having earned six Grammy nominations and numerous international awards (Osha, 2021). Afrobeat pioneers such as Femi Kuti and renowned Afrobeat drummer, Tony Allen, have maintain their distinct natures and style of music (Kariisa, 2018). Due to its sources of inspiration, Afrobeat usually features complex live instrumentation, often played on bass guitar, drums, African percussions and electric piano. This demonstrates a structural dissimilarity from the contemporary Afrobeats which produces its instrumentation electronically. Afrobeats features more simplistic instrumentation that is inspired by electronic dance music (EDM). The essential ideology of Afrobeat necessitates its distancing from the contemporary Afrobeats. The ideological layout of Afrobeat positions it in polarity with Afrobeats, which has been described as politically vacuous (Osha, 2021; Rens, 2021). Afrobeats videos are known for prominent featuring of nudity, parties and extravagant materialism. Afrobeats video and performance styles are closely parallel with the American hip hop genre more than it does with Afrobeat. Hence, American popular hip hop stars have been inclined to collaborative performances with Afrobeats stars particularly, Nigerian artistes. This has partially contributed to the growing global appeal of Afrobeats.

Nevertheless, despite the obvious ideological and structural differences between Afrobeat and Afrobeats, one can find that the spirit of the former transmits into the latter. Both are characterised with propelling dance on their audience. According to Nzewi (2007), dance to Africans "is a composite cultural statement. The centrality of dance to African artistry and communal experience being recognised in the foregoing, it is fitting that Fela Kuti's search for a uniquely African sound birthed the danceable Afrobeat. Regardless of the sobriety and occasional sombreness

of Fela Kuti's political vision conveyed in his music, Afrobeat is essentially built for dance. While this might have seemed incompatible with music suited for political protest one finds that the spirit of dance woven into Afrobeat accentuates rather than diminishes Fela Kuti's artistic cum political vision (Olorunyomi, 2013). The danceable aspect of Afrobeat kept its relevance among the youthful audience. In the same manner, dance is central to the Afrobeat's experience. Dance in Afrobeat conveys a sense of fun and optimism, regardless of the text hence, both musical genres move their listeners to dance .

Afrobeat and Nigerian Nationalism

Huddy, Ponte & Davies (2021) believe that nationalism has often been seen as a negative form of patriotism. This thought may be due to fact that nationalism focuses more on a positive feeling to one's own group but negative feeling to other groups. Druckman (1994) observes that a spirit of nationalism causes people to be sentimentally attached to their homeland, which motivates them "to help their country (goal oriented), and gain a sense of identity and self-esteem through their national identification" (p. 44). In the same line of thought, Ahlerup & Hansson (2011) notes that the upsurge of nationalist spirit within citizens often results in positive change for any nation. In the Nigerian case, being a multicultural nation with over two hundred and fifty ethnic and language groups, it was difficult for Nigeria to construct a single or unified cultural identity over the years. Despite government initiative on the adoption of Cultural Policy for Nigeria from UNESCO in 1988, culture and believe disparity have continued to reflect in many inter-ethnic disputes which have engulfed the nation since the amalgamation of these different ethnic cultures as one country in 1914. Over hundred years of co-existence, tribalism / ethnicism and its accompanying corrupt practices have remained as cancer in the political system of Nigeria. Hence, many Nigerian citizens have lost faith in the central government. Tribalism and ethnicism became the focus since many citizen's have now more faith in their ethnic cultures than national reputation. Ethnic sentiment is not peculiar to Nigeria, it is an observable phenomenon in several African countries especially, those nations that had to deal with Western imperialism and colonialism (Usman, 2014).

In all of these, music has taken the central role in creating a unifying peak for many ethnic cultures in Nigeria. Music in its nature has remained a culture carrier and signifier. Indigenous music has functioned as a viable tool for building, projecting and sustaining cultural identity. The contemporary Afrobeat has systematically harnessed its musical elements from major ethnic cultures in Nigeria and had grown to be more accepted by many Nigerian youths, both those at home and in the diaspora, irrespective of ethnic origin. Many Nigerians and other Africans national have paid much attention to Afrobeat as a unifying musical culture. This can be argued to be due to Afrobeat focusing more on entertaining its audience rather than thriving on ethnic sentiments. Consequently, Afrobeat gained more popularity in Nigeria and beyond than any other musical genre in West Africa. With the movement of Afrobeat beyond the shores of West Africa to the global stages, it has also gained more international recognitions and awards than every other musical genre in Nigeria. Afrobeat, has in the past three decades becomes the pride of many Nigerians; as a means for gaining self dignity and importance. Zeleza (2010) notes that music has been the primary means by which Africans in the diaspora have continuously circulate their cultural influences and identities. To those in the diaspora, it is not only a means of connecting with their African roots but also, a boost to their sense of pride and identity. Onafowokan (2020) observes that the sense of pride is linked to mainstream proliferation of Afrobeat, which presents African culture and consciousness as worthy of global recognition. Many Nigerians find pride in associating themselves with Afrobeat stars who they recognize as global stars, and their music genre as global music.

The global reception and recognition of Afrobeat are very vital to Nigerians as it has gone a long way in discourage the single story of corruption associated to Nigerian. There is no doubt that, Afrobeat stars have made significant contribution in construction of a unifying identity for Nigerian people as well as rebranding Nigerian global perception. The internationalization of Nigeria's image on a brighter and more acceptable light is evidenced in the roles and place of Nigerian Afrobeat stars in the global music scene.

In recent time, the most streamed music online 'One Dance' , is an Afrobeat performance by Nigerian global superstars; Drake and Wizkid. 'Love Nwantiti' is another well streamed Afrobeat love song by Nigerian Afrobeat star; CKay. Consecutive Grammy nominations for Burna Boy between 2020 and 2022, and his solo performance at the UEFA Champions League Final have solidified the Afrobeat star's position as legitimate global music icons (Osiebe, 2022). Alongside Wizkid and Burna Boy, Davido joins the exclusive list of international music artistes who have managed to sell out the O2 Arena in London. These and numerous other achievements of Afrobeat and Afrobeat stars (who are mostly Nigerian) have redefined the worth of 'Nigerianness' and 'Africanness'.

The flamboyant showcase of Afrobeats lifestyle as seen in the music videos negates the global perception of Africa as poor and underprivileged nation. Onafowokan (2020) observes that this display of wealth presents Africans (and by extension, Nigerians) as powerful individuals, an image not typically associated with Africa in the media. She also notes the promotion of African symbols within Afrobeats music videos; Burna Boy's Ankara trousers in his hit single, 'Ye' and the dancers in Wizkid's 'Come Closer' spotting Yoruba tribal marks. The use of African articles, symbols and display of African artifacts in Afrobeats music videos and performance have become common thereby, gradually changing the perception of Nigerian culture beyond ruin nation as often presented in media programmes around the globe. As a result, Nigerians, both at home and in the diaspora have found a common ground wherein they can stand proudly and be called Nigerians.

Afrobeats role as a diplomatic resource

Since 18th century, music has served as a diplomatic resource although, not much attention was paid to its roles as a tool for diplomacy. After the Cold War of 1947 -1991, as international politics gradually and steadily moved away from explicit use of power or military force, most world leaders started drifting to diplomatic relations with other nations of the world. Since it was obvious that the prevalent theories of realism and idealism seems inadequate for the then political climate and international relations, the formulation of the constructivist theory applied (Ramel & Prevost-Thomas, 2018, Yilmaz, 2008). According to McGlinchey, Walters & Scheinpflug (2017), constructivism perceives human experience, knowledge and systems as being socially constructed. It presents that the complexity of international relations makes it impossible to ignore human consciousness, values and beliefs. At such, the international system mostly thrives on common understanding among people (Einbinder, 2013). Hence, constructivism attributes diplomatic influence to both state and non-state actors and swiftly led to the conceptualisation of music diplomacy.

As policy makers came to terms with the powerful cultural influence of music and recognising that the cordiality of international relations is largely contingent upon cultural similarities, governments across the globe began to draw upon the influence of music to promote their cultural ideals and national image (McGlinchey, Walters & Scheinpflug, 2017). This was particularly useful to the United States (US), which through the proliferation of their popular music, familiarised the international community with American culture. This provided the US with a lot of soft power and paved the way for American political dominance over the last three decades (Stelowska, 2015). Nzewi (2007) observes that in Africa, music has always been a primary agent of inter-communal diplomacy. He notes that, African musical arts are rationalized not in themselves as abstract mathematical configurations, but as effective energies – proactive forces that accomplish crucial missions in human life and social systems. Through this knowledge, Nigerian music, even at its incipient stage had comprehended the influence of music diplomacy. This was first experimented with the popularization of Highlife and Juju musical genres within African continent in the 1960s and early 70s. To a large extent, the shared values propagated by these genres decreases the level of ethnocentric divisions among African nations especially, in West African region. Nevertheless, music diplomacy can only flourish when political actions and inactions of prevailing governments gear towards achieving better global human relation.

In the case of Nigeria, Afrobeat was well received by Nigerian citizens irrespective of ethnic regions. Its goal to open up the Nigeria's political mess attracted international attention to Nigeria's military dictatorships of the 1980s and 90s which were grossly frowned at by international community. Hence, efforts to embrace democracy were pursued by Nigerian government and political elites to enable acceptance and friendly relationship with other nations of the world. Music and musicians have significantly driven Nigerian's cultural and diplomatic relations with outside world than all government's policies and initiatives. Presently, Afrobeats genre has accomplished much-admired feat in the world's music and entertainment scene. Tiwa Savage's performance at King Charles's coronation ceremony was an example of cultural relationship that has started to grow between Nigeria and other nations of the world. In addition are, David Adeleke (AKA Davido) featuring in the 2022 World Cup opening ceremony, Burna Boy's solo performance at the UEFA Champions League closing ceremony performance in 2023. Just in the year 2024, Davido has been paid millions of dollars to perform in the United Masters Grammy weekend concert which was part of the festivals for the Academy Grammy Awards held in February 2, 2024. These and many others are some of the numerous instances indicating the global prominence that Afrobeats has attained in less than three decades. Nigerian Afrobeats stars have performed in virtually all major concert stages around the world. In the same vein, Afrobeats genre has attracted much collaboration in music business from around the world than any other musical genre in Nigeria. Several entertainment multinational companies such as Sony Music, Spotify and

Audiomack have set up regional operation offices in Nigeria, while numerous Nigerian Afrobeats artistes such as Wizkid, Davido, Tiwa Savage and Ckay have been signed by some of these international record labels.

Conclusion

The popularity of Afrobeats has assumed a more dynamic perception for Nigeria. It salvaged the country from the single story of corrupt people / government. While the political dilemma of the country remains an international notion, the diplomatic roles of the Afrobeats musical genre has significantly re-presents Nigeria's national image in a new and more positive light. Afrobeats musical activities have not only helped in reshaping the impression about Nigeria nation, it has also affected Nigerian economic growth positively as foreign investors are flooding the country and are establishing foreign record labels, digital music streaming companies and other entertainment-based companies. This demonstrates the astounding diplomatic capability of Afrobeats especially in presenting Nigeria in a new light to the world. While it is observable that diplomacy can only be truly successful when the will of political actions are geared towards the same purpose yet, music has shown to drive and spread the peoples' resolve more speedily and effectively than most political policies and plans. Afrobeats have in just few decades rebranded Nigeria's international reputation against the corrupt political repute of her government. In the hands of Afrobeats artistes, music has become a powerful diplomatic instrument, serving both to entertain the global audience and reshaping the Nigerian culture perception and consciousness in the globe. While it might not be absolutely correct to state that the Nigeria's national image has been totally reformed, it is indisputable to argue that a new Nigeria version has not been introduced to the world and has progressively continued to reshape the perception of Nigerians as a people.

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