

**NIGERIAN MUSIC INDUSTRY AS A TOOL FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL
REFORMS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

FACULTY OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

BENIN CITY

OCTOBER, 2025

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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HONOURS DEGREE IN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND DIPLOMACY,
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OCTOBER, 2025

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project work was carried out by **SARAH OMOLAYO AYANTOKUN** in the Department of History and International Studies University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.

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Head of Department

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DATE

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated first and foremost, to God Almighty, for his grace, wisdom and strength throughout this journey.

To my beloved family whose unwavering support, prayers and encouragement have been my greatest motivation, I am deeply grateful.

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I give all glory and thanks to God Almighty for His guidance, strength, and unfailing grace throughout the course of this project. Without Him, none of this would have been possible.

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I am deeply grateful to my parents for their love, sacrifices, and constant support, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. Your belief in me keeps me going. To my sweet Olivia, thank you for your love and support.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Culture and politics have gained renewed scholarly attention, especially within the context of non-traditional diplomacy and soft power. Soft power is the ability of a country to attract and co-opt rather than coerce and often finds its strongest expression in culture, values, and institutions.¹ In the case of Nigeria, one of the most potent cultural exports in recent decades has been its music industry. This industry, once rooted in traditional folk sounds and later politicized by artists like Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, has evolved into a global force of influence through genres like Afrobeat, Afropop, and Afrofusion. Historically, Nigerian musicians have not only entertained but also challenged state authority, interrogated societal injustices, and shaped public opinion.² Artists such as Fela, Eedris Abdulkareem, and more recently, Falz and Burna Boy, have transformed their musical platforms into vehicles of resistance and civic engagement.³ Music has become a channel through which disillusionment, national trauma, and the desire for reform are expressed particularly among Nigeria's politically conscious youth population. This was most visible during the #EndSARS protests, where music provided both a soundtrack and a unifying call for justice.⁴

Beyond national borders, Nigerian music has emerged as a diplomatic tool, reaching global audiences and reshaping Nigeria's international image. Artists now perform on global stages, win prestigious awards, and collaborate with international

musicians, thereby elevating Nigeria's cultural profile.⁵ As Toyin Falola argues, cultural products such as music serve not only as mirrors of society but also as instruments of cross-cultural negotiation and representation.⁶ The Nigerian music industry thus plays a dual role: internally as a catalyst for socio-political reform, and externally as a soft power agent in international relations.⁷ Despite its growing relevance, the role of music in Nigeria's diplomatic strategy remains largely underexplored in academic and policy circles. This study responds to that gap by investigating how the Nigerian music industry operates as a tool for domestic reform and global diplomacy. It interrogates the political messages embedded in contemporary Nigerian music, the industry's capacity to shape international narratives, and the ways in which music intersects with activism, national identity, and foreign policy.

Music in Nigeria has long functioned as a mirror of the nation's political and social landscape. From the Highlife sounds of the post-independence era to the defiant Afrobeat of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Nigerian music has historically been deployed as a mechanism of protest, public enlightenment, and social mobilization. Fela's body of work, for instance, served as an unrelenting critique of military regimes, colonial legacies, and social injustice, transforming Afrobeat into a genre of resistance.⁸ His music not only exposed state corruption and oppression but also catalyzed mass consciousness among the urban working class and disenfranchised youth. This tradition of musical activism has endured into the present era. Musicians such as Eedris Abdulkareem, 2Baba, Falz, and Burna Boy have continued the legacy of using music to spotlight injustice and demand

accountability from political leaders.⁹ Songs like “Jaga Jaga,” “This Is Nigeria,” and “Monsters You Made” serve as examples of contemporary Nigerian music addressing themes such as economic inequality, police brutality, and failed governance.¹⁰ Through coded language, satire, and emotionally charged narratives, these artists have been able to engage politically apathetic populations, particularly the youth, in conversations about reform and justice.

Notably, the #EndSARS movement highlighted the mobilizing power of music in Nigerian activism. Protesters used music to galvanize unity, communicate frustration, and create a sense of solidarity across ethnic and social lines.¹¹ Live performances, protest anthems, and curated playlists became critical instruments in sustaining morale and amplifying the message of the demonstrations. In this way, music has not merely reflected societal issues but has actively contributed to shaping political discourse and fostering collective agency among citizens.

Moreover, in an era where international image is critical for investment, migration, and diplomatic engagement, music emerges as a strategic asset. It enables Nigeria to project a youthful, creative, and resilient identity counterbalancing the often-negative portrayals found in international media.¹² In this light, the music industry should no longer be seen as a peripheral sector but as a central player in Nigeria’s quest for reform, unity, and global relevance. This study, therefore, positions music not just as an artistic expression but as a functional instrument of nation-building and international diplomacy. By critically exploring its dual roles in domestic politics and global representation, this

research contributes to an emerging body of work that advocates for the cultural sector's integration into governance and foreign policy frameworks.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this research is to critically examine how the Nigerian music industry functions as a tool for socio-political reform and as a medium of international cultural diplomacy.

1. To analyze the role of Nigerian musicians in shaping public discourse on issues such as governance, corruption, police brutality, and civic responsibility.
2. To assess how Nigerian music contributes to national identity formation, political awareness, and youth mobilization.
3. To explore the extent to which Nigerian music influences international perceptions of Nigeria and serves as a vehicle of soft power in foreign relations.
4. To investigate the historical evolution of protest music in Nigeria and its continuity in contemporary times.
5. To evaluate the implications of global recognition of Nigerian music for cultural diplomacy, cross-border collaborations, and informal state representation.

These objectives bridged the gap between cultural production and political scholarship, and demonstrate that music is not only a tool for entertainment but also an actor in the political and diplomatic space.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to the role of the Nigerian music industry as a tool for socio-political reform and its influence in international relations. The research

emphasizes contemporary Nigerian music, with particular reference to genres such as Afrobeat, Afropop, and Afrofusion, while also drawing on historical antecedents like Highlife and traditional protest songs. The analysis covers music as a medium of resistance, public consciousness, and civic engagement, alongside its growing significance as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and soft power.

While examples from across Nigeria's diverse musical landscape are considered, the study pays particular attention to artists whose works directly engage with governance, injustice, and foreign representation figures such as Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Eedris Abdulkareem, 2Baba, Falz, and Burna Boy. The study does not attempt a comprehensive survey of all Nigerian music; rather, it focuses on selected artists, songs, and movements that illustrate the political and diplomatic potential of the industry. Furthermore, the temporal scope emphasizes the post-independence period to the contemporary era, situating the evolution of Nigerian protest music within both local and global contexts.

Literature Review

Tejumola Olaniyan's *Arrest the Music! Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* offers a foundational lens through which the relationship between Nigerian music and political resistance can be understood. His work positions Fela Kuti as a cultural and political icon whose music served not only as artistic expression but as a deliberate strategy of rebellion against military dictatorship, colonial residue, and societal oppression.¹³ Olaniyan's analysis shows how Fela transformed Afrobeat into an instrument of socio-political agitation, using music to awaken the masses and critique state violence. His framing of

music as “rebel art” contributes directly to discussions on how contemporary Nigerian artists continue to engage with governance and injustice through song.

Oludaja Oyeleye, in his article titled “Music as a Political Tool in Contemporary Nigeria,” argues that music has served historically as both a protest and a pedagogical tool, educating the public on their rights while questioning institutional failings.¹⁴ He observes that from Highlife to modern Afrobeats, Nigerian musicians have evolved in their political commentary, often adapting their message to reflect current events and social tensions. His work is significant for this research as it traces the continuity between older forms of protest music and newer expressions by artists like Falz and Burna Boy.

Chika Okeke-Agulu's analysis of the cultural dimensions of the #EndSARS protests highlights how music operated as a mobilizing and symbolic force within the youth-led demonstrations. He explains that protest songs such as “This Is Nigeria” by Falz or Burna Boy’s “20:10:20” did not merely entertain but unified and energized a generation seeking structural change.¹⁵ His findings affirm the central thesis of this study by confirming music’s transformative role in social movement-building and political engagement.

Toyin Falola’s broader cultural histories often include references to music as a vehicle for projecting Nigerian identity beyond its borders. In *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, he outlines how culture especially through literature, film, and music becomes a site of resistance and an informal channel for asserting national narratives.¹⁶

His insight into postcolonial identity politics enriches the argument that Nigeria's global cultural reach, particularly through music, is a powerful form of soft diplomacy.

Joseph Nye's theory of soft power is central to this research, particularly in understanding the informal diplomatic strength music can exert in shaping global perceptions.¹⁷ Although Nye's theory is not Nigeria-specific, it has been applied to numerous cultural contexts, including Africa, to explain how non-coercive cultural outputs like music can influence international relations. The concept of attraction over force aligns closely with how Nigerian music captivates global audiences while subtly projecting national consciousness.

Adewale Maja-Pearce, in his exploration of Lagos' urban culture and pop expression, discusses the commercialization of Nigerian music and how this commercial space still accommodates political commentary. He maintains that artists continue to encode resistance within otherwise "danceable" tracks, making politics palatable for mass audiences.¹⁸ His observations are especially relevant in understanding how messages of reform can exist alongside entertainment value in today's Afrobeats landscape.

Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, in his curatorial essays on contemporary African music and identity, suggests that Nigerian artists now function as cultural ambassadors whose music carries implicit and explicit representations of Nigerian society.¹⁹ His work connects the dots between popular culture and global diplomacy, illustrating how Nigerian musicians shape foreign impressions of the country in ways that transcend official government narratives.

Ebun Adegboruwa's legal analysis of freedom of speech and cultural expression in Nigeria underscores the risky terrain musicians often navigate. In his study on censorship, he explains how artists who critique the state have historically faced arrests, bans, and threats, yet continue to find innovative ways to speak truth to power.²⁰ This dynamic tension between suppression and expression is critical in understanding the courage and complexity behind politically conscious Nigerian music.

In their study on the global impact of Afrobeats, Nnamdi Madichie and Dami Ajayi argue that the genre is more than a sonic trend; it is a transnational movement reconfiguring how Nigeria is viewed abroad.²¹ Through streaming platforms, global tours, and international awards, Nigerian artists are not just exporting music but are rebranding the nation's image. Their work strengthens the link between cultural production and international relations, anchoring the music industry within broader diplomatic frameworks.

Lastly, Michael Veal's biography *Fela: The Life and Times of an African Musical Icon* provides deep insight into how music becomes both personal narrative and national allegory.²² Veal explores the symbolic function of lyrics, performance, and rhythm in advancing socio-political critique. His scholarship lays the groundwork for understanding the cultural weight artists carry in politicized societies like Nigeria, where music often doubles as a mechanism of survival, resistance, and vision.

1.5 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, drawing heavily from secondary sources to explore the intersection between Nigerian music, socio-political reform, and international relations. Emphasis will be placed on the interpretive analysis of scholarly literature, historical accounts, and existing case studies that discuss music as a tool for activism, public consciousness, and soft power diplomacy.

Secondary sources comprise academic journals, books, news articles, policy reports, and online databases that focus on Nigerian music, protest culture, youth movements, and cultural diplomacy. Particular attention will be given to works on soft power, music and activism in Africa, postcolonial theory, and Nigeria's foreign relations.

Chapter's Outline

This research is structured into five chapters as follows:

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is the Introductory aspect of the project which provides the background to the study, including the socio-political role of music in Nigeria, its global rise and diplomatic significance, and its potential for reform and global influence. It also covers the study's methodology, scope, and literature review.

CHAPTER TWO: CULTURAL EVOLUTION OF NIGERIAN PROTEST MUSIC

This chapter examines Nigeria's musical heritage, colonial and postcolonial resistance songs, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's activism, the evolution from Afrobeat to modern protest styles, and music as a tool of collective memory and consciousness.

CHAPTER THREE: THE NIGERIAN MUSIC INDUSTRY AND SOCIO-POLITICAL REFORMS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

The focus of this chapter is to analyze the role of music in shaping governance, activism, national identity, and civic engagement, particularly focusing on contemporary issues such as youth movements and social justice campaigns.

CHAPTER FOUR: NIGERIAN MUSIC AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

This chapter explores the global spread of Nigerian music, its soft power dimensions, collaborations, and cultural diplomacy, as well as the challenges of institutionalizing music within Nigeria's foreign policy framework.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter summarizes the entire research work, presents key findings, and provides recommendations for harnessing the Nigerian music industry as a tool for both domestic reform and international diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced the study by situating Nigerian music within the broader discourse of culture, politics, and international relations. It traced the socio-political role of music in Nigeria, highlighted its growing global influence as a tool of cultural diplomacy, and outlined the conceptual framework guiding this research. The methodology, scope, and review of relevant literature have also been presented to establish the academic grounding of the work. Overall, the chapter demonstrates that

Nigerian music is more than entertainment; it is a dynamic force that reflects social realities, challenges power structures, and shapes international perceptions of the nation. With this foundation laid, the next chapter turns to a historical and cultural analysis of Nigerian protest music, showing how its evolution provides critical context for understanding its contemporary role in socio-political reform and diplomacy.

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CHAPTER TWO

CULTURAL EVOLUTION OF NIGERIAN PROTEST MUSIC

Introduction

This chapter provides a historical and cultural mapping of Nigerian music as a site of resistance and socio-political engagement. It situates the emergence of protest music within the broader currents of Nigeria's cultural heritage, examining how indigenous sounds, colonial disruptions, and postcolonial struggles shaped the foundations of politically conscious art. Music in Nigeria has always been more than entertainment; it has functioned as a communicative medium, an archive of memory, and a vehicle for mobilization.¹ The chapter begins by tracing the deep roots of Nigerian musical traditions, highlighting their role in community life, spirituality, and political commentary prior to colonialism.² It then explores the transformations introduced by colonial rule and the post-independence environment, showing how genres like Highlife became subtle yet powerful tools of cultural resistance. The figure of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti is given particular attention, as his creation of Afrobeat fused artistic experimentation with unrelenting political critique, laying the groundwork for future generations of activist musicians.³

The analysis then turns to the evolution of Nigerian music from Afrobeat to Afrofusion and contemporary protest forms, noting how artists such as Burna Boy, Falz, and others continue to harness music as a platform for civic engagement.⁴ Finally, the chapter considers music as collective memory and consciousness, demonstrating how

songs not only reflect historical realities but also inspire future visions of justice, reform, and national identity. In this way, the chapter establishes the continuum of Nigerian protest music as both a domestic force for accountability and a contributor to Nigeria's cultural influence globally.

Nigerian Musical Heritage

Music in Nigeria predates colonialism and has always occupied a central role in the cultural, spiritual, and political lives of its people. Traditional Nigerian societies used music as a medium of storytelling, ritual, and collective memory, embedding it within festivals, initiation rites, religious ceremonies, and systems of governance.⁵ In Yoruba communities, talking drums (dùndún) functioned as communicative tools, capable of mimicking speech patterns to send messages across villages. Among the Igbo, music was an integral part of masquerade performances and communal festivals, while the Hausa employed praise-singing as a means of reinforcing authority, valor, and social order.⁶ These practices demonstrate how music was not a peripheral art but a deeply embedded social institution that mediated relationships between individuals, communities, and the divine.

Colonial contact introduced disruptions to this cultural framework but also produced new musical fusions. Western instruments, hymnals, and military brass bands interacted with indigenous rhythms to give rise to emergent styles such as Highlife in the early twentieth century.⁷ Highlife became more than just a popular urban genre, it reflected the cosmopolitan aspirations of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria, while

simultaneously carrying coded critiques of inequality and social hierarchy. Toyin Falola observes that cultural forms such as music often operated as “resistant narratives” in colonial and nationalist struggles, articulating both continuity with tradition and aspirations for independence.⁸ This historical heritage laid the groundwork for Nigeria’s later protest music. By embedding socio-political commentary within rhythm and melody, Nigerian musicians sustained a dual function: preserving cultural memory while resisting domination. These dynamics would eventually crystallize most powerfully in the Afrobeat movement spearheaded by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, whose work stands at the intersection of tradition and modernity, art and politics.⁹

Colonial and Postcolonial Music as Resistance

The arrival of colonialism in Nigeria profoundly altered the political and cultural structures of society. Yet, even within these disruptions, music remained one of the most resilient forms of resistance and self-expression. Early colonial authorities recognized the communicative power of indigenous music and often sought to regulate its use.¹⁰ Drumming in particular was restricted in certain regions, as colonial administrators feared its ability to mobilize large gatherings and convey messages of defiance. However, suppression only strengthened music’s role as an oppositional force. African communities adapted by embedding dissent into religious hymns, folk songs, and emerging urban styles, ensuring that music continued to operate as a vehicle of collective protest.¹¹

Highlife music, which gained prominence from the 1930s through the 1960s, became one of the earliest postcolonial genres to articulate socio-political dissatisfaction.

Drawing from Ghanaian influences but infused with Nigerian linguistic and rhythmic elements, Highlife became the sound of urban modernity. Artists such as Bobby Benson and Victor Olaiya employed brass instruments and Western harmonies but embedded in them lyrics that critiqued social inequalities and reflected nationalist aspirations.¹² During the independence struggle, Highlife became an important soundtrack, as its lyrics emphasized freedom, unity, and cultural pride in opposition to colonial domination. By merging African rhythms with imported instruments, musicians symbolically reclaimed cultural space that colonial rule sought to suppress.¹³ The post-independence era further intensified the political potential of music. As Nigeria grappled with civil war (1967–1970) and the turbulence of military regimes, musicians turned their art into a forum for national reflection. Highlife musicians like Rex Lawson sang about dislocation and trauma during the war, while juju artists such as King Sunny Adé wove narratives of survival, community healing, and resilience into their music.¹⁴ At the same time, traditional griot-style storytelling continued to blend with popular music, ensuring that songs carried moral and political messages to their audiences. The adaptability of these genres highlights the way Nigerian music responded to both colonial legacies and postcolonial realities.

Central to this shift was the emergence of Afrobeat, pioneered by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti in the 1970s. Fela's fusion of Highlife, jazz, funk, and Yoruba rhythms created a sonic landscape that was at once deeply Nigerian and transnational. His songs, however, went beyond aesthetics, they directly confronted the failures of postcolonial governance.

Tracks like *Zombie* (1976) ridiculed the blind obedience of soldiers, while *Coffin for Head of State* (1980) condemned corruption and state violence.¹⁵ Tejumola Olaniyan describes Afrobeat as a quintessential form of “rebel art,” situating Fela’s work as a deliberate rejection of colonial mentalities and neo-colonial oppression.¹⁶ Through satire, allegory, and relentless performance, Afrobeat became not only an artistic movement but also a political strategy.

Equally important was the role of women in this landscape, though often overlooked in mainstream narratives. Female musicians such as Onyeka Onwenu and Christy Essien-Igbokwe used their platforms to critique patriarchy and advocate for social reform during the late twentieth century.¹⁷ Their contributions remind us that protest music was not solely the domain of male figures like Fela but was embedded across gendered experiences of colonialism and its aftermath.

By the late twentieth century, Nigerian music had firmly established itself as a language of dissent and social commentary. Colonial authorities may have initially sought to suppress indigenous rhythms, but the resilience of Nigerian musicians transformed those rhythms into an enduring archive of resistance. From Highlife’s nationalist optimism to Afrobeat’s radical critique, postcolonial music became inseparable from the struggles for justice, freedom, and dignity in Nigeria. This continuity of protest across eras demonstrates how music functioned not only as entertainment but as a strategic cultural force, linking colonial defiance to postcolonial activism.¹⁸

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and the Foundation of Musical Activism

The story of Nigerian protest music cannot be told without Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, whose artistry transformed the landscape of political resistance in Africa and beyond. Born in 1938 into a family of strong political traditions his mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, was a pioneering feminist and anti-colonial activist, Fela inherited a legacy of resistance that shaped his music and worldview. His early exposure to jazz during his studies in London, combined with his return to Nigeria in the 1960s, catalyzed the creation of Afrobeat, a genre that fused Highlife, jazz, funk, and traditional Yoruba rhythms into a distinctly political sound.¹⁹

Fela's approach to music was never divorced from politics; instead, it was a deliberate strategy for confronting authoritarianism. His lyrics directly named corrupt leaders, military regimes, and systemic failures. Songs like *Zombie* (1976) caricatured the military's blind obedience, portraying soldiers as unthinking instruments of oppression.²⁰ In *Coffin for Head of State* (1980), he protested the brutal killing of his mother, who died after being thrown from a window during a government raid on his Kalakuta Republic commune.²¹ Through satire, biting allegory, and unapologetic defiance, Fela elevated music into a medium of uncompromising political critique. Tejumola Olaniyan aptly describes his oeuvre as "rebel art," where performance was inseparable from protest.²²

Central to Fela's activism was the Kalakuta Republic, a commune he declared independent from the Nigerian state. It became a space of cultural production, political discourse, and resistance, where musicians, activists, and marginalized youth found

refuge. The government perceived it as a threat; raids, arrests, and violent assaults became frequent, with the most notorious in 1977 when soldiers razed the commune.²³ Yet these assaults only reinforced Fela's role as the voice of the oppressed, amplifying his credibility as a fearless opponent of state repression.

Equally significant was Fela's use of performance spaces, particularly the Afrika Shrine in Lagos. More than a nightclub, the Shrine functioned as a site of alternative political education. Each night, Fela blended music, dance, and extended monologues, what he called "yabis" where he dissected the failures of government and colonial legacies.²⁴ These sessions educated audiences who might otherwise have been excluded from formal political discourse, making music a tool of mass political literacy. In this way, the Shrine blurred the line between concert hall and parliament, offering a radically democratic space for dialogue.

Despite repeated arrests estimated at over 200 times, Fela refused to be silenced. His confrontations with successive Nigerian regimes underscored the risks of cultural expression in authoritarian contexts. Egun Adegboruwa notes that Fela's persecution illustrates the precarious balance between censorship and free speech in Nigeria, a struggle that continues to confront contemporary artists.²⁵ By pushing the boundaries of expression, Fela embodied both the vulnerability and resilience of the musician as activist.

The international dimension of Fela's activism also warrants attention. His tours in Europe and North America exposed global audiences to the struggles of postcolonial Nigeria. Michael Veal emphasizes how Fela framed his music as both a local critique and

a Pan-African manifesto, advocating for unity against neo-colonial exploitation.²⁶ His songs consistently referenced themes of African identity, dignity, and liberation, situating Nigeria's struggles within broader continental narratives. By doing so, he positioned himself as a transnational figure whose influence transcended borders.

Importantly, Fela's activism was not without controversy. His polygamous lifestyle, frequent use of marijuana, and confrontational style polarized Nigerian society. Critics argued that his personal life undermined his political messages, while supporters viewed his rejection of conventional norms as an extension of his rebellion against oppressive structures. Regardless of perspective, his life demonstrated the inseparability of art and politics in Nigeria's postcolonial context.

Fela's legacy endures in the work of contemporary artists who borrow his language, aesthetics, and political courage. Musicians like Burna Boy, Seun Kuti, and Falz explicitly draw upon Fela's foundations, blending entertainment with critique.²⁷ The continued invocation of his memory in protests, documentaries, and academic discourse attests to his role as the foundational figure of Nigerian musical activism. His vision transformed music from a cultural pastime into a weapon of mass mobilization, permanently altering the relationship between Nigerian art and politics.

Trend from Afrobeat to Afro-fusion and Modern Protest Styles

The influence of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti did not end with his passing in 1997; rather, it laid the foundation for a continuum of artistic resistance that has evolved across generations. Afrobeat, with its dense rhythms, elongated instrumental sections, and explicitly political lyrics, became the bedrock upon which subsequent Nigerian genres have emerged. Yet as Nigeria transitioned into a new millennium characterized by democratization, globalization, and digitalization, the form and function of protest music also transformed.²⁸ Afrobeat's immediate successors, such as Seun Kuti and Femi Kuti, maintained fidelity to their father's model. Their music retained its confrontational tone, use of live bands, and politically charged lyrics. Seun, for instance, with Egypt 80 (Fela's former band), continues to deliver fiery critiques of corruption, governance failures, and neo-colonialism.²⁹ However, for a younger generation of Nigerians who came of age in the era of Nollywood, social media, and Afropop, protest music required reinvention. The long, jazz-inspired arrangements of Fela gave way to shorter, radio-friendly tracks infused with pop sensibilities while still carrying social commentary.

This transformation crystallized in the emergence of Afrofusion known as a genre blending Afrobeat with hip hop, reggae, dancehall, R&B, and global pop. Burna Boy is often hailed as the pioneer of this form, crafting songs that are both commercially successful and politically resonant. His *African Giant* (2019) and *Twice As Tall* (2020) albums not only topped charts internationally but also tackled issues of colonial history, police brutality, and African identity.³⁰ By mixing protest themes with melodies and

rhythms that appealed to global audiences, Burna Boy redefined what it meant to be a Nigerian protest musician in the 21st century. Other artists have also adapted the legacy of Afrobeat into new stylistic approaches. Falz's *This Is Nigeria* (2018), inspired by Childish Gambino's *This Is America*, blended rap, satire, and visual critique to expose issues such as corruption, religious hypocrisy, and police brutality.³¹ The song's viral reception underscored how modern protest music often thrives not only on sound but also on visual storytelling, making music videos powerful vehicles for social commentary. Similarly, artists like 2Baba (*E Be Like Say*, 2006) and Eedris Abdulkareem (*Jaga Jaga*, 2004) demonstrated how protest lyrics could exist within mainstream pop frameworks without alienating mass audiences.

This evolution also reflects a shift in lyrical strategy. Whereas Fela's protest was direct and confrontational, contemporary artists frequently employ coded language, metaphor, and satire to bypass censorship and avoid government reprisals.³² This subtler form of critique ensures that songs remain commercially viable while still resonating politically. Maja-Pearce observes that this blending of entertainment with resistance makes political messages more palatable to diverse audiences, expanding the reach of protest music beyond activists to everyday listeners.³³ Another defining feature of modern protest music is its global orientation. The diasporic connections of Nigerian artists have broadened the scope of their activism. For instance, Burna Boy's *Monsters You Made* (2020), featuring Chris Martin of Coldplay, framed Nigerian struggles within wider narratives of colonial exploitation and systemic inequality.³⁴ Such collaborations

highlight how Afrofusion doubles as protest and diplomacy, positioning Nigerian music as both an artistic force and a platform for advocacy on the world stage.

Digital platforms have been instrumental in this shift. The democratization of distribution through YouTube, Audiomack, and Spotify has allowed politically conscious tracks to gain rapid traction without reliance on traditional broadcasters who might censor dissenting voices.³⁵ During the #EndSARS protests, playlists of songs like Burna Boy's 20:10:20 and David.o's Fem became rallying cries, echoing across streets, smartphones, and international news reports. Music in this era is no longer confined to clubs or radio waves; it circulates globally in real time, amplifying its political resonance. The stylistic innovations of Afrofusion and modern protest music thus mark a strategic adaptation. They balance the need for mass appeal with the moral imperative to critique power. While Fela embodied the uncompromising radicalism of his era, contemporary artists negotiate between protest and profit, embedding dissent within commercially viable forms.³⁶ Far from diluting resistance, this hybridity ensures that music remains both a cultural export and a political instrument.

Ultimately, the evolution from Afrobeat to Afrofusion underscores the resilience of Nigerian protest music. It reveals an unbroken thread of activism running from the radical shrine of Kalakuta to the global stages of Coachella and the Grammys. In doing so, it highlights the adaptability of music as both a historical archive and a future-oriented strategy for social transformation.

Music as Collective Memory and Tool for Consciousness

Music in Nigeria has never existed as a mere form of entertainment; it functions as a living archive of national struggles, victories, and aspirations. From precolonial times, oral traditions embedded in folk songs, praise chants, and griot performances ensured that communities could transmit histories across generations without written texts.³⁷ In this sense, music has long served as a vessel of collective memory, preserving experiences of oppression, resilience, and hope within melodies and rhythms.

This mnemonic role deepened during the colonial and postcolonial periods. Resistance songs not only captured the grievances of the people but also embedded historical markers within lyrics. For instance, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's *Zombie* immortalized the brutality of the military regime, ensuring that future generations would remember both the violence of dictatorship and the courage of defiance.³⁸ These songs, replayed decades later, still evoke the same outrage and solidarity, showing how music transforms into a time capsule of political consciousness. In the modern era, the mnemonic function of music has expanded through digital circulation. Songs like Falz's *This Is Nigeria* (2018) and Burna Boy's *20:10:20* (2020) are not simply cultural products; they are historical records of specific injustices while the former highlighting systemic corruption, the latter memorializing the Lekki Toll Gate shootings of October 20, 2020.³⁹ Through their viral spread on platforms like YouTube and Audiomack, these songs transcend national borders, carrying Nigeria's socio-political memory into the global consciousness.

Collective memory in music also operates through ritual performance. During the #EndSARS protests, music was not just played; it was re-enacted communally in streets, plazas, and online spaces. Protest anthems became rituals of remembrance, enabling individuals to feel connected to a shared struggle.⁴⁰ In this way, music both archived the experience and created embodied practices that etched the memory into participants' lives. As Chika Okeke-Agulu notes, protest music during #EndSARS unified disparate groups, transforming pain into a collective force for resistance.⁴¹ Moreover, Nigerian protest music plays a crucial role in shaping political consciousness. Its ability to weave historical narratives with present struggles means that it functions simultaneously as an archive and a teacher. By revisiting past injustices in song, artists remind listeners of unresolved histories while linking them to current demands for change. Toyin Falola's observation that cultural products act as informal sites of resistance underscores this role of music as a pedagogical tool that nurtures political awareness outside the formal classroom.⁴²

This interplay of memory and consciousness is not limited to protest contexts; it also extends to diasporic identity formation. Nigerian artists performing abroad evoke ancestral struggles in their lyrics, ensuring that diasporic youth remain tethered to collective histories of colonialism, migration, and resilience. For example, Burna Boy's *African Giant* draws from Pan-African narratives to create a sense of historical continuity between Nigerian struggles and global Black liberation movements.⁴³ Through such works, protest music becomes both a repository of national history and a transnational

bridge of collective identity. Ultimately, music as collective memory ensures that Nigeria's political history cannot be erased, even when state-controlled archives attempt to suppress or distort it. Its rhythms and lyrics safeguard stories of injustice and resistance, while its circulation nurtures consciousness among new generations. In this sense, Nigerian protest music is more than sound; it is a social archive, a classroom, and a call to action simultaneously reminding the nation of where it has been and pointing it toward where it must go.

The historical and cultural evolution of Nigerian protest music has attracted considerable scholarly attention, with works emphasizing its dual function as both an artistic and political tool. Tejumola Olaniyan's *Arrest the Music! Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* provides one of the most authoritative accounts of how Fela Kuti transformed Afrobeat into a potent weapon of political agitation and social critique.⁴⁴ Olaniyan situates Fela's art in the continuum of African resistance movements, highlighting the inseparability of music, identity, and protest in Nigeria's postcolonial struggles. Michael Veal's *Fela: The Life and Times of an African Musical Icon* further deepens this understanding by documenting the evolution of Afrobeat as not merely a musical genre but as a political philosophy rooted in defiance against authoritarianism.⁴⁵ Veal explains how Fela's lyrics, performances, and lifestyle became embedded in Nigeria's collective consciousness, creating a legacy of musical activism that subsequent generations of artists inherited. Chika Okeke-Agulu's analysis of the #EndSARS protests situates contemporary Nigerian protest music within this historical lineage.⁴⁶ He

demonstrates that while the modalities of protest have shifted from live shrine performances to viral protest anthems showing the underlying function of music as a mobilizer and consciousness-raiser remains constant. His observations underscore continuity between past and present in Nigeria's protest tradition. Toyin Falola's broader cultural histories, especially *Nationalism and African Intellectuals*, provide context for understanding how music, along with literature and film, has consistently functioned as a site of resistance and postcolonial negotiation.⁴⁷ This framework helps situate Nigerian protest music as part of the wider cultural arsenal against domination, exploitation, and erasure.

Adewale Maja-Pearce's writings on Lagos urban pop culture remind us that even within highly commercialized spaces, Nigerian music retains its potential for political commentary.⁴⁸ His insights are critical in tracing the trajectory from Fela's Afrobeat to contemporary Afropop and Afrofusion, genres that now carry subtle but significant political undertones embedded in entertainment. Similarly, Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi positions Nigerian musicians as cultural ambassadors whose works project political and cultural identities beyond borders.⁴⁹ His arguments enrich the understanding of Nigerian protest music not only as internal resistance but also as a tool of international cultural diplomacy, connecting the discussion with the broader global narrative of music as soft power.

It could be argued therefore that Nigerian protest music cannot be divorced from the socio-political realities that birthed it. From colonial resistance songs to the anthems

of Fela Kuti and the digital protest tracks of the 21st century, music in Nigeria has consistently operated as both memory and movement and has served as an enduring tool for reform, identity assertion, and diplomatic engagement.

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CHAPTER THREE

MUSIC INDUSTRY AND SOCIO-POLITICAL REFORMS IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

Introduction

The Nigerian music industry has grown from a largely informal cultural sector into one of the most dynamic creative economies in Africa. In terms of structure, the industry is composed of local record labels, independent artists, producers, promoters, and digital distributors. While earlier decades were dominated by physical sales through compact discs and street vendors, the digital revolution has fundamentally reshaped how music is produced, distributed, and consumed. Platforms such as YouTube, Audiomack, Spotify, and Apple Music have provided Nigerian artists with unprecedented global reach, enabling them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and connect directly with audiences across borders.¹

In terms of economic impact, the music industry contributes significantly to Nigeria's creative economy. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the entertainment and creative arts sector, which includes music, accounts for a steadily increasing share of Nigeria's GDP, reflecting the industry's role in employment, youth engagement, and cultural exportation.² The industry's capacity to generate wealth through concerts, endorsements, and streaming revenues demonstrates how music is no longer simply a cultural activity but also a central economic driver. The influence of Nigerian music extends far beyond economics. Afrobeats and its subgenres have become symbols

of national identity and pride, representing resilience, creativity, and global visibility.³ Artists like Burna Boy, Wizkid, and Davido have not only topped international charts but also reshaped Nigeria's global reputation by countering stereotypes of poverty and instability with narratives of cultural richness and vibrancy. Their presence at international festivals and award platforms such as the Grammys exemplifies how Nigerian music now functions as both an entertainment export and a form of soft power.⁴

Moreover, the industry's domestic influence is tied to its deep integration with everyday life in Nigeria. From political rallies to religious gatherings, music permeates both formal and informal spaces, serving as a medium of storytelling, education, and mobilization.⁵ In particular, urban youth culture has been shaped by the sound and aesthetics of contemporary Nigerian music, which provides not only entertainment but also a language of resistance and social commentary. As Adewale Maja-Pearce notes, even highly commercialized Nigerian pop retains the capacity to encode political and cultural critique within its rhythm and lyrics.⁶ This multifaceted structure economic, cultural, and political makes the Nigerian music industry a critical space for understanding socio-political reforms in contemporary Nigeria. Its reach into global markets, its ability to mobilize domestic audiences, and its influence on political discourse demonstrate that the industry is not simply reflective of Nigerian society but an active participant in shaping its trajectory.

Case Studies: Falz, Burna Boy, Eedris Abdulkareem, and #EndSARS

A critical understanding of the Nigerian music industry's role in socio-political reforms requires close examination of individual artists and movements that embody the intersection of music and activism. Among the most significant are Falz, Burna Boy, Eedris Abdulkareem, and the #EndSARS protest movement, each of whom illustrates how music functions as a tool for resistance, political education, and collective mobilization.

Falz (Folarin Falana) represents a new generation of Nigerian artists who integrate satire, legal consciousness, and popular culture in political critique. His 2018 track *This Is Nigeria* adapted Childish Gambino's *This Is America* to contextualize Nigeria's endemic problems of corruption, police brutality, and poor governance.⁷ The song's accompanying video, which depicted violent law enforcement, religious hypocrisy, and youth disillusionment, attracted both local and international attention, positioning Falz as a voice of civic responsibility.⁸ Beyond music, Falz has leveraged his legal background to amplify messages of accountability, becoming a prominent figure in the 2020 #EndSARS movement. Burna Boy exemplifies the merging of global recognition with local activism. His album *African Giant* (2019) is a manifesto of Pan-African consciousness, addressing colonial exploitation, African unity, and resistance to Western dominance.⁹ Songs like *Monsters You Made* explicitly criticize governance failures and exploitative elites, resonating with Nigeria's disenfranchised youth while also appealing to international audiences.¹⁰ Burna Boy's role in the #EndSARS protests, including his

release of “20:10:20” in memory of the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, underscores his position as a transnational activist whose music bridges Nigerian struggles with global movements for justice.¹¹

Eedris Abdulkareem pioneered modern Nigerian protest music with his 2004 track *Jaga Jaga*, which denounced corruption, poor infrastructure, and political mismanagement.¹² The song was banned by then-President Olusegun Obasanjo’s government, yet it became an anthem for disaffected Nigerians. Abdulkareem’s fearless critique set the stage for subsequent artists to openly confront the state, showing that even commercial pop could be a vehicle for protest. His legacy remains relevant, as younger artists continue to reference *Jaga Jaga* as a template for politically charged music. The #EndSARS movement of 2020 illustrates the collective power of music in mobilizing mass protest. Protest sites were characterized by spontaneous musical performances, curated playlists, and the chanting of politically conscious songs.¹³ Tracks such as Falz’s *This Is Nigeria* and Burna Boy’s *20:10:20* became symbolic anthems, galvanizing unity across ethnic and class divides. Scholars like Chika Okeke-Agulu highlight how the movement demonstrated music’s ability to not only reflect societal grievances but also sustain collective energy and build solidarity in the face of state repression.¹⁴ Taken together, these case studies reveal the multifaceted role of Nigerian artists and protest movements in shaping socio-political discourse. They demonstrate how individual creativity, global reach, and grassroots activism intersect to produce music that is not

merely entertainment but a strategic instrument of reform and resistance in contemporary Nigeria.

Music as Civic Education and Youth Mobilization

Music in contemporary Nigeria functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a vital instrument of civic education and youth mobilization. Given that over 60 percent of Nigeria's population is under the age of 30, the music industry has emerged as one of the most effective channels for reaching and influencing the youth demographic.¹⁵ Unlike formal civic education programs, which are often limited by bureaucracy and low engagement, popular music speaks directly to young people in a language they understand through rhythm, storytelling, and relatable narratives.

Artists such as Falz, Burna Boy, and Eedris Abdulkareem have consistently embedded social critique and civic messages in their music, addressing themes such as corruption, inequality, police brutality, and leadership accountability.¹⁶ By blending entertainment with political messaging, these artists provide a form of public pedagogy that transcends classroom learning. For example, Falz's *This Is Nigeria* offered a biting commentary on systemic failures while simultaneously sparking conversations among young audiences about their role in demanding accountability.¹⁷ Music has also been instrumental in mobilizing young Nigerians during protests and political movements. The #EndSARS movement demonstrated how protest anthems could unify diverse groups of young people, giving them a sense of solidarity and shared purpose.¹⁸ Protest songs functioned as both a morale booster and a communication strategy, helping sustain

momentum during weeks of demonstrations. This dynamic reflects what Tejumola Olaniyan has described as the “rebel art” tradition, where music becomes both a cultural and political weapon.¹⁹ Furthermore, the digital era has amplified music’s role in civic mobilization. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Audiomack enable politically conscious songs to circulate rapidly among youth, often becoming viral phenomena that spark offline action.²⁰ The accessibility of these platforms reduces barriers to civic participation, allowing even politically disengaged youths to become indirectly engaged through music consumption and sharing.

This convergence of music, digital platforms, and youth activism underscores how the Nigerian music industry has transcended its entertainment function to become a powerful civic institution. By shaping consciousness, mobilizing protest, and inspiring participation in governance, music now stands as one of the most influential tools of socio-political reform in contemporary Nigeria.

Role of Music in Electoral Campaigns, Policy Critique, and Protest

The entanglement of music with Nigerian electoral politics has a long history, reflecting how artists use their platforms to critique governance while political actors simultaneously exploit music’s popularity for electoral mobilization. In many instances, music serves dual purposes: as a tool for campaigns orchestrated by politicians, and as an instrument of critique wielded by artists who challenge state failures.

On the one hand, music has been central to electoral campaigns, where popular artists are recruited to endorse candidates, perform at rallies, or compose campaign

jingles.²¹ This practice reflects the recognition of music's unique influence over the youth demographic, who constitute the majority of Nigeria's voting population.²² However, while this co-option of music helps politicians reach voters, it has also been criticized for reducing music to an instrument of propaganda, often detaching it from its activist potential. On the other hand, politically conscious artists have strategically used their platforms to critique policies and expose state corruption. Eedris Abdulkareem's Jaga Jaga remains one of the earliest examples of how music directly challenged Nigeria's political elite, provoking controversy and even a presidential ban.²³ More recently, Falz's This Is Nigeria and Burna Boy's Monsters You Made have continued this tradition, employing satire, allegory, and raw commentary to highlight the inadequacies of governance and the urgent need for reform.²⁴

Music's role in protest is perhaps its most visible form of political intervention. During the #EndSARS protests, artists not only performed but also released songs that directly addressed police brutality and state repression. These tracks became symbols of defiance, unifying protesters and amplifying their demands.²⁵ The protest context affirmed the power of music to function as both a critique of existing policies and a rallying cry for systemic transformation.

Importantly, the digitalization of Nigerian music has further strengthened its role in electoral critique and protest movements. Social media platforms enable songs critiquing the state to reach millions instantly, bypassing traditional censorship and state control.²⁶ Thus, music now serves as an immediate and widely accessible form of policy

commentary that can challenge official narratives and empower citizens to hold leaders accountable.

This convergence of campaign utility, policy critique, and protest underscores the centrality of music in Nigeria's democratic processes. Rather than being a passive cultural product, music actively engages with governance, shaping both political participation and civic consciousness.

State Response: Support, Censorship, and Cooperation

The Nigerian state's relationship with music and musicians has historically oscillated between suppression, ambivalence, and selective collaboration. On one hand, the government has often recognized the immense cultural capital of the music industry and sought to harness it for national branding and international diplomacy. On the other hand, artists who employ music as a tool of resistance frequently encounter censorship, harassment, and criminalization. This paradox reflects the contested space that music occupies within Nigerian politics.

Censorship has long been a defining feature of state response to politically conscious music. During the Obasanjo administration, Eedris Abdulkareem's Jaga Jaga was banned for its critical portrayal of Nigeria as corrupt and dysfunctional.²⁷ Similarly, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti faced repeated arrests, concert disruptions, and government intimidation for using Afrobeat as a medium of dissent.²⁸ Even in recent years, artists such as Falz and Burna Boy have reported surveillance and unofficial threats due to their politically charged lyrics and involvement in activism.²⁹ These patterns confirm Egun

Adegboruwa's observation that freedom of cultural expression in Nigeria remains precarious, especially when artists challenge the legitimacy of the state.³⁰ At the same time, the Nigerian government has shown interest in co-opting music for positive image projection. Through initiatives like Nigeria at 60 concerts and partnerships with artists at international events, the state has attempted to use music as a form of cultural diplomacy.³¹ Yet such gestures often appear superficial, as they lack sustained investment in the music industry as a strategic partner for governance and nation-building. More recently, some instances of cooperation have emerged. State institutions occasionally collaborate with artists for voter education campaigns or anti-drug abuse initiatives, acknowledging music's influence over young populations.³² However, these partnerships are often selective, prioritizing non-confrontational artists while sidelining outspoken critics. This selective engagement reveals both the possibilities and limitations of state-artist cooperation in contemporary Nigeria.

Ultimately, the Nigerian government's response to music reflects a tension between recognizing its global and domestic influence and fearing its power as an oppositional tool. While support and cooperation exist, censorship remains the default mode of engagement whenever music challenges political authority. This ambivalent posture underscores the need for a more coherent state strategy that views music not as a threat but as a partner in advancing reform, unity, and cultural diplomacy.

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CHAPTER FOUR

NIGERIAN MUSIC AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In the contemporary global system, nations are increasingly seeking to assert influence not only through economic or military means but also through cultural diplomacy, the strategic use of cultural expression to shape international perception and foster cooperation.¹ Within this framework, the concept of soft power, popularized by Joseph Nye, highlights the ability of a state to attract and persuade rather than compel others to align with its interests.² For Nigeria, a country whose image has often been overshadowed by narratives of corruption, terrorism, and underdevelopment, the music industry has emerged as a powerful medium of soft power and informal diplomacy.³

Over the last two decades, Nigerian music particularly through the global rise of Afrobeats and Afrofusion has transcended its entertainment value to become a defining component of Nigeria's international identity.⁴ Artists such as Burna Boy, Wizkid, Davido, Tems, and Tiwa Savage have become de facto cultural ambassadors, bridging linguistic, racial, and geopolitical divides through collaboration with global stars like Beyoncé, Drake, and Justin Bieber.⁵ These artistic exchanges have contributed to reframing global discourse about Nigeria, positioning the nation as a hub of creativity, innovation, and resilience rather than conflict and instability.⁶ Moreover, Nigerian music's success on global platforms such as the Grammy Awards, Billboard charts, and Coachella demonstrates how cultural production can function as a diplomatic tool independent of state machinery.⁷ The influence of Afrobeats has not only generated economic

opportunities but has also humanized Nigeria's image abroad, challenging stereotypes while amplifying narratives of African excellence.⁸

Despite this growing influence, the Nigerian government has yet to systematically incorporate its vibrant music sector into formal foreign policy.⁹ The absence of structured cultural diplomacy frameworks means that much of Nigeria's soft power projection remains accidental, driven by private actors rather than coordinated state initiatives.¹⁰ This chapter therefore examines Nigerian music as a key instrument of international relations, exploring how it embodies soft power principles, reshapes global narratives, fosters diaspora connections, and contributes to cultural diplomacy.

Music as Soft Power: Joseph Nye's Theoretical Lens

The theoretical foundation of soft power provides a crucial lens through which Nigeria's musical influence on the international stage can be analyzed. Joseph S. Nye conceptualized *soft power* as the ability of a country to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment.¹¹ This form of power emerges from the appeal of a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policies when they are seen as legitimate or morally authoritative.¹² In a globalized media ecosystem where images, sounds, and symbols travel faster than political statements, music has become one of the most effective carriers of soft power influence.¹³

For Nigeria, the music industry has become a vibrant instrument for projecting national identity, pride, and values beyond its borders. The cultural exportation of Afrobeats represents more than a sonic phenomenon as it signifies a recalibration of how

Nigeria is perceived within international relations.¹⁴ Through rhythm, language, and style, Nigerian artists communicate narratives of creativity, resistance, and modern African identity that resonate with global audiences.¹⁵ The success of Nigerian music on platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube, where billions of streams originate from non-African listeners, illustrates the soft power potential embedded within this creative sector.¹⁶ Unlike the traditional diplomacy that relies on state institutions, music diplomacy operates organically through attraction and voluntary participation. Nigerian artists like Burna Boy, Wizkid, and Tems have achieved this influence not by official mandate but through the magnetic pull of their artistry. Their collaborations with global icons such as Beyoncé, Drake, and Justin Bieber create cultural bridges that reflect the principles Nye articulated: persuasion through admiration.¹⁷ As Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi observes, such cross-border artistic exchanges demonstrate how “sound itself becomes a diplomatic medium capable of reshaping perceptions of Africa.”¹⁸

Furthermore, the popularity of Nigerian music abroad has given rise to new cultural networks and fan communities that function as informal nodes of diplomacy. These communities engage in cultural exchange, learning African expressions, slang, and values through music—a process that broadens international empathy and cultural understanding.¹⁹ The Nigerian state, however, has largely overlooked this form of influence, failing to institutionalize its music industry as a strategic asset in foreign policy.²⁰ In essence, Nigerian music embodies Nye’s core argument that attraction and shared values are often more powerful than coercion or wealth in global affairs. It serves

as an authentic, non-political, and emotionally resonant means through which Nigeria asserts presence and relevance on the world stage. This alignment between music and soft power theory underscores the potential for culture to redefine diplomatic practice in Africa's largest democracy.

How Nigerian Music Influences Global Narratives about Nigeria

The international rise of Nigerian music has fundamentally altered how the country is perceived across the world. For decades, global narratives about Nigeria were dominated by associations with corruption, terrorism, and economic instability.²¹ However, the cultural revolution ushered in by Afrobeats and its global derivatives has begun to counterbalance these narratives, positioning Nigeria as a creative powerhouse and cultural leader within Africa and beyond.²² As Tejumola Olaniyan notes, music is not merely a sonic art form, it is a performative discourse that communicates power, identity, and ideology.²³ Nigerian musicians, in their lyrical and visual storytelling, have rewritten the country's global image from one of dysfunction to one of innovation and cultural confidence. Through the global reach of their art, they have reconstructed the idea of "the Nigerian brand" from within the sphere of everyday experience rather than through political propaganda.²⁴

Burna Boy's *African Giant* album is one of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon.²⁵ The project weaves themes of Pan-African pride, colonial critique, and self-determination, introducing foreign audiences to narratives of African excellence that defy historical stereotypes. His Grammy win in 2021 marked not just personal success

but a symbolic victory for Nigerian cultural identity on the world stage.²⁶ Similarly, Wizkid's *Made in Lagos* album, which topped international charts, projects an image of urban sophistication and global relevance while remaining rooted in African rhythm and language.²⁷ Streaming platforms and social media have further amplified this soft power. According to *Audiomack Data Insights*, Nigeria's music consumption and export rates have increased exponentially, with more than 70% of Afrobeats streams coming from outside Africa.²⁸ These platforms democratize access, enabling fans from Tokyo to Toronto to engage directly with Nigerian music, language, and culture. Thereby constructing a global digital community centered around Nigeria's creative output.

Moreover, Nigerian music videos have become powerful vehicles for visual diplomacy. As Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi observes, the aesthetics of Nigerian pop often blend cosmopolitan modernity with distinctly African motifs, creating a visual narrative of pride and belonging.²⁹ These portrayals challenge orientalist and reductive depictions of Africa as backward or chaotic, instead presenting Nigeria as dynamic, self-confident, and globally integrated. International collaborations have also been instrumental in reframing Nigeria's cultural identity. Partnerships with Western artists such as Beyoncé, Drake, Ed Sheeran, and Justin Bieber have facilitated a two-way cultural dialogue in which Nigeria is no longer a passive receiver of Western influence but an equal participant in global cultural exchange.³⁰ This reflects Toyin Falola's argument that African cultural production increasingly acts as a negotiation between the local and the

global which serves as a dialectic that allows nations like Nigeria to reclaim agency in defining their global identity.³¹

In essence, Nigerian music now functions as a counter-narrative, a medium that replaces outdated stereotypes with modern, empowering representations. Through sound, image, and performance, artists have become cultural diplomats who tell Nigeria's story from within, offering the world a new lens of understanding built on rhythm, resilience, and pride.

Diaspora Connection: Global Collaborations and Cultural Exchange

The Nigerian music industry has transcended national boundaries, evolving into a cultural bridge that connects Africa with its diaspora communities and the broader global stage.³² Through collaborations, performances, and shared cultural narratives, Nigerian artists have engaged in a form of musical diplomacy that strengthens identity, fosters unity, and reshapes cross-cultural perceptions.³³ This global spread of Nigerian music is deeply rooted in the dynamics of the African diaspora. The shared history of displacement, colonialism, and cultural hybridity has made music a medium through which collective memory and transnational identity are negotiated.³⁴ As Toyin Falola asserts, African popular culture operates as a living dialogue between the continent and its diaspora, producing new identities that are simultaneously global and rooted in tradition.³⁵

Afrobeats, in particular, has become the sonic language of this dialogue. Artists such as Burna Boy, Wizkid, Tiwa Savage, and Tems embody the Pan-Africanist impulse

that Fela Kuti once championed, merging indigenous rhythms with Western pop, reggae, and hip-hop influences.³⁶ This blending of sounds not only reflects Nigeria's cosmopolitan evolution but also creates a shared aesthetic space for African and diasporic audiences to connect emotionally and politically.³⁷ The proliferation of collaborations between Nigerian artists and their international counterparts such as Wizkid and Drake on "One Dance," Burna Boy and Ed Sheeran on "For My Hand," or Tems' contributions to Beyoncé's *Renaissance* demonstrates how music facilitates cultural diplomacy in real time.³⁸ These collaborations symbolize reciprocity rather than dependency, positioning Nigerian artists as global peers rather than peripheral participants.³⁹ Beyond entertainment, these exchanges have broader diplomatic implications. As Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi explains, artistic collaborations enable new circuits of soft power by allowing non-state actors, musicians, producers, and cultural institutions to function as unofficial ambassadors.⁴⁰ The success of Nigerian artists in diasporic and Western spaces humanizes Nigeria's image, replacing stereotypes with stories of resilience, creativity, and innovation.

Digital globalization has further amplified these interactions. Platforms like YouTube, Spotify, and TikTok have turned Nigerian music into a transnational social phenomenon. According to *Audiomack Data Insights*, nearly 80% of Afrobeats streams now come from outside Africa, with significant engagement from diasporic populations in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.⁴¹ This global circulation transforms fans into participants in cultural exchange, creating emotional and aesthetic

bonds that transcend geography. Furthermore, the Nigerian diaspora itself has become a vital stakeholder in the industry's growth. Artists such as Skepta, J Hus, and Little Simz which are British-born musicians of Nigerian descent illustrates the generational transmission of identity and pride through music.⁴² Their works often navigate between Western and African experiences, challenging the binary distinctions between “home” and “abroad.” This diasporic creativity serves as both cultural reclamation and redefinition, asserting a modern, self-determined vision of Nigerian identity.

Thus, the Nigerian music industry functions as a platform for cultural diplomacy, diasporic solidarity, and global dialogue. It extends beyond economic success or entertainment value. It represents a form of identity politics that uses rhythm and performance to rewrite the global African story from the perspective of pride, power, and participation.

The Role of Music in Shaping Diplomatic Identity and Foreign Perception

In the modern international system, where image and perception increasingly define diplomatic success, Nigerian music has emerged as a strategic soft power instrument shaping how the nation is viewed globally.⁴³ Unlike traditional diplomacy, which operates through embassies and state officials, cultural diplomacy harnesses the persuasive and emotional power of creative expression to foster mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation among nations.⁴⁴ Within this framework, the Nigerian music industry performs a dual function—promoting national identity while subtly negotiating Nigeria's place in global politics.

Music provides Nigeria with what Joseph Nye describes as *attractive power* the capacity to shape global preferences through culture and values rather than coercion.⁴⁵ Through music, Nigeria articulates narratives of creativity, resilience, and youthfulness that challenge outdated Western stereotypes portraying the country as unstable or corrupt. The global success of Nigerian artists thus becomes a diplomatic currency, advancing the nation's prestige far beyond what traditional foreign policy instruments could achieve. Toyin Falola observes that culture often serves as a *people-to-people diplomacy* that bridges the gap between nations in ways formal political interactions cannot.⁴⁶ Nigerian musicians, through tours, interviews, and collaborations, act as unofficial ambassadors, engaging global audiences with narratives of hope and authenticity. In this sense, every performance, lyric, and music video contributes to Nigeria's diplomatic identity; an identity rooted in rhythm, creativity, and self-expression. The influence of music on foreign perception is evident in how Nigerian artists have redefined what it means to be African on the world stage.⁴⁷ Afrobeats, with its fusion of traditional percussion, Western harmonies, and multilingual lyrics, projects an image of Africa that is cosmopolitan yet authentically rooted. When artists like Wizkid, Burna Boy, and Tems perform at international festivals or feature in global campaigns, they are not only entertaining audiences but also shaping how millions perceive Nigeria and its cultural dynamism.⁴⁸

Furthermore, the branding power of Nigerian music has contributed to *nation branding* a process by which states shape their reputations through cultural and symbolic assets.⁴⁹ As Nnamdi Madichie and Dami Ajayi note, the global visibility of Nigerian

musicians has created a new kind of diplomacy centered on *emotional connectivity*, where pride in cultural identity fosters positive associations with the nation itself.⁵⁰ Through Afrobeats and Afrofusion, Nigeria exports not just sound but attitude and this is a confident assertion of modern African identity that counters decades of external misrepresentation.

However, this cultural diplomacy is largely informal and uncoordinated. The Nigerian government has yet to integrate the creative industries into its formal foreign policy apparatus, leaving individual artists to carry the burden of national image-making.⁵¹ Despite this institutional gap, the results are undeniable: Nigerian music has achieved what decades of state-led public diplomacy could not capturing global admiration through cultural authenticity.⁵² Music's role in shaping Nigeria's diplomatic identity extends beyond entertainment to the realm of symbolic politics. Every global chart-topping song, international collaboration, and award acceptance speech serves as a subtle yet powerful declaration of Nigerian presence and pride.⁵³ As such, the music industry stands as both a mirror and a messenger reflecting the nation's internal complexities while projecting its aspirations for recognition and respect on the global stage.

Missed Opportunities and Recommendations for Cultural Policy Integration

Despite the immense potential of Nigerian music as a diplomatic and reformative instrument, the nation has yet to establish a coherent policy framework to harness its cultural power.⁵⁴ The absence of structured collaboration between the creative sector and

government institutions has resulted in lost opportunities for national branding, economic growth, and international engagement.⁵⁵ While Nigerian musicians have become global ambassadors through their talent and influence, their impact operates in isolation from formal state-driven diplomacy. Damilola Oyedele notes that Nigeria's soft power projection remains largely "accidental," driven by individuals rather than institutions.⁵⁶ This disconnect reflects a deeper issue in Nigeria's foreign policy architecture: an overreliance on political diplomacy and underinvestment in cultural diplomacy.⁵⁷ Whereas countries like South Korea and Jamaica have successfully embedded their music industries into strategic national branding through programs such as the "K-Wave" and "Brand Jamaica," Nigeria's creative diplomacy remains underfunded and uncoordinated.⁵⁸

The Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture have yet to effectively integrate cultural diplomacy into their foreign engagement strategies.⁵⁹ Cultural attachés in embassies often lack training or funding to promote Nigerian music and creative industries abroad. Furthermore, there is minimal institutional support for exporting Nigerian cultural content through formal agreements, partnerships, or cultural exchange programs.⁶⁰ This policy vacuum diminishes the long-term diplomatic and economic gains that the Nigerian music industry could otherwise generate. As Toyin Falola observes, culture must be treated as a strategic national resource rather than a peripheral leisure activity.⁶¹ He argues that the arts, when supported by the state, can reinforce national pride, unity, and global influence. If effectively

institutionalized, Nigerian music could play a central role in reshaping the country's foreign policy image and strengthening its cultural economy.⁶²

Moreover, formal integration between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could facilitate the establishment of Nigerian Cultural Centers abroad and this will be similar to France's Alliance Française or China's Confucius Institutes.⁶³ These centers could host exhibitions, concerts, and workshops, providing structured platforms for Nigerian musicians and creatives to engage global audiences. Partnerships between Nigerian record labels and foreign cultural organizations could also enhance distribution, exchange, and training opportunities for emerging artists.⁶⁴ The Nigerian Copyright Commission and other regulatory bodies must be strengthened to protect the intellectual property rights of artists whose works circulate globally.⁶⁵ This protection not only ensures economic sustainability for creatives but also enhances Nigeria's credibility as a nation that values and protects innovation.

Recommendations for strengthening Nigeria's cultural diplomacy include:

1. **Institutional Integration:** Embed creative industries in the country's national foreign policy strategy through cross-ministerial collaboration.
2. **Cultural Infrastructure:** Establish cultural centers, festivals, and scholarships to promote Nigerian music abroad.
3. **Education and Exchange:** Facilitate artist residency programs, bilateral music exchange initiatives, and cultural diplomacy training for diplomats.

4. **Creative Economy Policy:** Provide grants, tax incentives, and export subsidies to support international creative ventures.
5. **Narrative Control:** Encourage local media and foreign missions to use Nigerian music as a vehicle for countering misinformation and promoting positive national identity.

By institutionalizing these measures, Nigeria can transform its informal musical diplomacy into a formalized instrument of international relations. A system that combines cultural vitality with strategic policy implementation.⁶⁶ The global prestige of artists like Burna Boy, Tems, and Wizkid demonstrates that the creative economy is not just an entertainment sector but a cornerstone of twenty-first-century diplomacy.⁶⁷ The Nigerian music industry stands as both a cultural treasure and a diplomatic tool waiting to be fully harnessed. The state's recognition and support of this potential will not only redefine Nigeria's foreign relations but also position the nation as a leading voice in global cultural discourse.⁶⁸

Nigerian music has evolved beyond entertainment into a potent diplomatic and socio-political instrument, one that projects the nation's creative spirit and resilience across the globe.⁶⁹ Through Afrobeats and its offshoots, Nigeria has gained unprecedented cultural visibility, transforming international perceptions from skepticism to admiration. The rhythm, language, and imagery of Nigerian music have become vessels of national pride, carrying narratives of strength, unity, and innovation. Yet, this influence has thrived largely without structured state involvement. The achievements of

artists like Burna Boy, Wizkid, and Tems illustrate that cultural capital when properly harnessed can advance national interest as effectively as traditional diplomacy.⁷⁰ As Joseph Nye reminds us, power in the twenty-first century is increasingly defined by attraction, not coercion.⁷¹ Nigeria's music, therefore, stands as a living embodiment of soft power, one capable of fostering international goodwill, bridging cultural divides, and redefining how Africa's most populous nation engages the world. This shows that institutionalizing cultural diplomacy is not just a recommendation but a necessity. The Nigerian government must integrate music and the creative arts into its formal diplomatic and policy frameworks, ensuring that this cultural momentum translates into sustainable national influence.⁷² In doing so, Nigeria can transform its artistic brilliance into a cornerstone of its global identity, projecting not only sound but significance to the world.⁷³

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CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Music, once dismissed as mere entertainment, has evolved into one of Nigeria's most powerful instruments of social transformation and international engagement. Like a melody uniting diverse notes, Nigerian music weaves art, activism, and diplomacy into a single narrative of identity and reform. The study established that beyond rhythm and performance, music has become a form of political discourse and a strategic tool of soft power.¹ From Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's Afrobeat revolution to Burna Boy's global Afrofusion, Nigerian music now mirrors national consciousness while reshaping global perceptions.² Culture particularly music has thus emerged as a vital component of Nigeria's diplomatic arsenal, projecting national values and aspirations through creative expression.³ This chapter summarizes the study's key contributions, outlines policy recommendations, and concludes with reflections on music's enduring influence as a reformative and diplomatic force.

Contribution to the Field of International Studies and Diplomacy

This research situates the Nigerian music industry within the discourse of cultural diplomacy and international relations. Drawing on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, it demonstrates how attraction rather than coercion can advance national interests through creative means.⁴ Nigerian musicians, acting as informal ambassadors, have redefined diplomacy by projecting a more dynamic image of the nation abroad.⁵

The study also shows that digital platforms like YouTube, Spotify, and Audiomack have transformed diplomacy into a participatory and networked process.⁶ Nigerian artists now engage global audiences directly, turning streaming platforms into stages for national identity performance.⁷ Furthermore, Nigerian music challenges stereotypes of poverty and instability by projecting narratives of creativity, innovation, and resilience.⁸

By integrating insights from political science, sociology, and cultural theory, this study broadens the lens of diplomacy to include the creative sector as an arena of negotiation, soft influence, and cross-cultural understanding.⁹

Recommendations for Policy and Diplomacy

1. Institutionalize Cultural Diplomacy:

The Federal Government, through the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture, should create a National Council for Cultural Diplomacy to promote music, film, and the arts as instruments of global influence.¹⁰

2. Integrate Music into Foreign Policy:

Cultural exchange programs, global concerts, and collaborative platforms should become part of Nigeria's diplomatic agenda.¹¹

3. Support the Creative Economy:

Strengthening copyright laws and investing in digital infrastructure will empower artists and expand Nigeria's soft power reach.¹²

4. Expand Public–Private Partnerships:

Collaborations between government and entertainment stakeholders such as record labels and streaming platforms can increase Nigeria’s international visibility.¹³

5. Promote Cultural Education and Exchange:

Diplomatic missions should partner with universities and art institutions to promote Nigerian music as a language of peace and shared identity.¹⁴

These measures would enable Nigeria to move from informal cultural influence to an intentional and sustainable diplomatic strategy.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future studies could compare Nigeria’s musical diplomacy with that of other African nations such as Ghana or South Africa to identify continental patterns of cultural soft power.¹⁵ Quantitative analysis could also explore how global collaborations, awards, and streaming data translate into tangible diplomatic benefits.¹⁶ Additionally, research on gender representation in Nigeria’s music diplomacy highlighting figures like Tiwa Savage and Tems would deepen understanding of inclusivity in cultural representation.¹⁷

Music as a Reformative and Diplomatic Force

Nigerian music continues to serve as both a mirror and an engine of social change. From Fela’s fearless political resistance to the reformist lyrics of Falz and Burna Boy, musicians have become agents of civic awareness and transformation.¹⁸ On the global stage, Afrobeats has rebranded Nigeria as a center of creativity and cultural leadership.

Through sound, imagery, and performance, music has humanized the Nigerian narrative, showcasing resilience and unity amidst challenges.¹⁹

Ultimately, this study reaffirms that diplomacy is not confined to statecraft, it thrives in rhythm, storytelling, and artistic imagination. Music, as Nigeria's most universal language, continues to unite, reform, and represent. Its rhythm transcends borders, and its message of freedom, hope, and identity remains Nigeria's strongest soft power instrument in the global community.²⁰

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