



The Concept of Change and Genre Development: A Case Study of Highlife Music

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Highlife music developed in the mid 20th century in West Africa from a fusion of military and regimental brass band music of frontier forces and colonial administration; Jazz, Swing and other popular music forms from America; Calypso, Samba Cha Cha Cha, Meringue and other forms from the Caribbean and the West Indies; guitar music of Liberian *Kru* sailors, music of returning ex-slaves and ex-service men as well as the social recreational music of tribal groups in the West African sub-region. Because of its diverse parentage, and the ethnic and cultural diversities of the West African sub-region, the stylistic framework of Highlife music is far from being uniform. Coupled with generational modifications arising from the socio-technological changes of the 21st century, the issue of what constitutes the 'original' Highlife and its definitive and stylistic framework in contemporary times, has been an unresolved one among practitioners and patrons across generational groups specifically in Ghana and in Nigeria. This has led to several 'revival' concerts since the 1980s in a desperate bid to bring back the 'good old Highlife', regarding new developments as bastardization of the 'original'.

Data for this paper were gathered mainly during my research on Highlife music in the West African sub-region between 2005 and 2008, where the issues of what constitutes Highlife music and the rules of inclusion and exclusion continuously confronted me. Coupled with my experience as a studio musician, producer and band leader, working with various musicians and bands in the West African sub-region since the 1980s, I strongly felt the need to develop analytical and theoretical models with which to analyze popular music, especially from the viewpoint of historical relativity and historical specificity. In doing this, I adapted three developmental change models from business management perspective and deployed these models in analyzing developmental trends and categorization of the products of these changes. To further concretize these analytical approaches, I then developed two new theoretical models of my own based on the theory of social reconstructionism in which I posited that African popular music like the African man, never dies but passes through cycles of transformational changes and genre

development which ensures its sustainability along a historical and generational continuum.

The paper is divided into five sections:

1. **Introduction:** This section gives a brief historical background of the development of Highlife music with special focus on Ghana and Nigeria. Issues in its social construction and its articulation in various West African cultures will also be discussed in some details.
2. **Highlife as a Musical Genre:** This section is a review of literature on genre theories. This is with a view to resolving certain issues surrounding the classification of creative works according to certain categories. The basic goal here is to bring out the justification or otherwise for categorization of creative works according to certain criteria and the validity of such criteria.
3. **The Concept of Change and Genre Development**
This section features the deployment of three graphic change models in interrogating the concept of change and genre development, especially as it relates to the changing face of Highlife music in contemporary times.
4. **Towards Social Reconstructionism**
This is a graphic representation of an indigenous model on which African popular music analysis can be based.
5. **Observations and Conclusion**

Hopefully, these new theoretical models will put to rest the twin issues of decline and revival which have characterized the landscape of Highlife music and other popular music genres in Africa in contemporary times. It will also resolve the issues of historical contextualization, thus saving the genre from becoming a static socio-musical phenomenon. My findings in this regard, will avail current scholars on African popular music of new critical approaches to understanding African popular music against the backdrop of the social and technological changes of the 21st century.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Austin Emielu is a seasoned professional and music scholar who has so brilliantly combined the subjective eccentricities of the performer with the objective rationality of the academic scholar; bridging the gap between theory and praxis. He bagged the Bachelor of Arts degree in the Performing Arts with special emphasis on music from the University of Ilorin in 1987. Thereafter, he began an active musical life where he combined band playing with private instruction in music, studio engineering and production. For about fifteen years he traveled extensively and worked with many performing and recording artistes from Nigeria, Ghana, Togo and Cameroon. He came back into the academia in 2001 and bagged a Master of Arts degree in African Studies with emphasis on music from the prestigious University of Ibadan in Western Nigeria in 2004. He began his Ph.D. research on the Origin, Development and Sustenance of Highlife Music in Nigeria in 2005 which led to his award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in the Performing Arts with special emphasis on music in April 2009.

He is currently an academic staff of the Department of the Performing Arts, University of Ilorin where he teaches courses in African Music, Music Theory, Afro-American Music, Applied Music and Popular Music. His research interest is in African Popular Music and Popular Music Pedagogy. He has written and published several articles on African popular music in reputable Journals. His forthcoming book *Nigerian Highlife Music* is currently in the Press. He is married with children.