

HARMONY IN DIVERSITY: MUSIC EDUCATION AS A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL COHESION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential of music education to enhance social cohesion in Nigeria's diverse society. In the face of ongoing ethno-religious conflicts and socio-political divisions, both traditional and modern musical spaces serve as important educational channels for promoting unity and structural integration. Using social identity theory and culturally responsive teaching, the study develops a dual framework to examine how music education helps bridge cultural gaps. By analyzing various Nigerian musical genres—such as Yoruba Fuji, Igbo Ogene, Hausa Kentu, and contemporary Afrobeats—the paper shows how shared musical experiences foster empathy, collective memory, and intercultural understanding. It advocates for a decolonized and expanded national music curriculum that actively incorporates indigenous knowledge. Ultimately, music education is viewed not just as an artistic practice but as a vital socio-political tool supporting peace and national unity in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Music Education, Social Cohesion, National Integration, Nigerian Music Genres, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria comprises over 250 ethnic groups and 500 languages, forming a complex socio-cultural fabric. While diversity enriches the culture, it has historically caused conflicts, ethnic tensions, and political unrest. Even decades after its formation and independence, Nigeria struggles to establish a unified national identity, as local loyalties often outweigh national ones. In such a fragmented environment, traditional diplomatic methods often fall short, making it necessary to explore innovative, grassroots peacebuilding strategies. Music, a vital part of everyday Nigerian life, stands out as a powerful yet underused tool for social change and fostering national unity.

Every society comprises diverse groups of people; as such, individual and group identities become paramount amid conflicting perspectives, and *modus operandi* prevails. Hence, guiding these societies through a medium of common interest is crucial for interconnectedness and peaceful coexistence. The use of music in educating

societies is an age-long practice that started in family circles; music has been used in many human activities as an integrating medium for uniting members of the society, from sacred to secular lyrics. Social cohesion has been a theme and teaching in many songs. Music is a vital instrument for bringing these different groups together. Music is an indispensable tool for social cohesion, spiritual growth, community empowerment, and bridging boundaries. Research carried out by Hanna Rijken in 2025 reveals that cohesion takes place in three ways while they sing together: musical, spiritual, and social. Musical cohesion occurs while singing together, including spiritual cohesion and the experience of interconnectedness. Another research by Ayu Arifka in 2024, which explores the role of art in building social cohesion in multicultural societies, reveals that participation in arts activities significantly increases social cohesion. Types of arts such as music, dance, theater, and drama are most effective in promoting social interaction, cultural understanding, and reducing prejudice between groups. This implies that music plays the role of bridging/bonding among community members of diverse cultural leanings.

Historically, music within the African context has always been more than just passive entertainment; it functions as a lively, communal institution. It acts as a historical record, a means for moral socialization, a form of political resistance, and a way to foster community unity. However, despite this rich cultural background, modern formal music education in Nigeria tends to be stuck in colonial ways, emphasizing Western art music, staff notation, and European classical repertoires instead of indigenous teaching methods. This difference in curriculum creates a disconnect between formal education and the actual social and cultural experiences of the students.

The paper aims to highlight the place of music education in projecting social cohesion among pupils/students in institutions of learning and society at large. It contends that a strategic, culturally attentive overhaul of music education can act as a key driver for promoting social unity in Nigeria. Incorporating regional musical styles into classroom learning helps break down ethnic stereotypes, foster empathy, and develop a collective sense of citizenship. By examining Nigeria's historical, traditional, and modern musical genres, the study shows how both formal and informal music teaching can bridge structural divides and create a strong foundation for national cohesion.

METHODOLOGY

Review of related materials was used to provide insights into the ideal of social cohesion, music, and music connectivity to social cohesion. Also, materials on music lyrics relating to social cohesion were extracted from the internet and other sources.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical pillars: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP).

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, suggests that a person's self-identity is largely influenced by their perceived membership in social groups. The theory describes three key psychological processes: social categorization, identification, and comparison. In divided societies such as Nigeria, these processes often lead to strong in-group favoritism, such as ethnic loyalty and hostility towards out-groups, like inter-ethnic prejudice.

In music education, Social Identity Theory (SIT), offers a way to see how making music together can reshape group distinctions. Music serves as a powerful socio-emotional equalizer. When students from varied ethnic backgrounds participate in group ensembles, singing, or songwriting, the sense of 'us' broadens. The common artistic goal turns "us versus them" into a cohesive "we." Collaborative musical activities demand synchronized actions, attentive listening, and mutual dependence, all of which help reduce psychological barriers and lessen biases against out-groups.

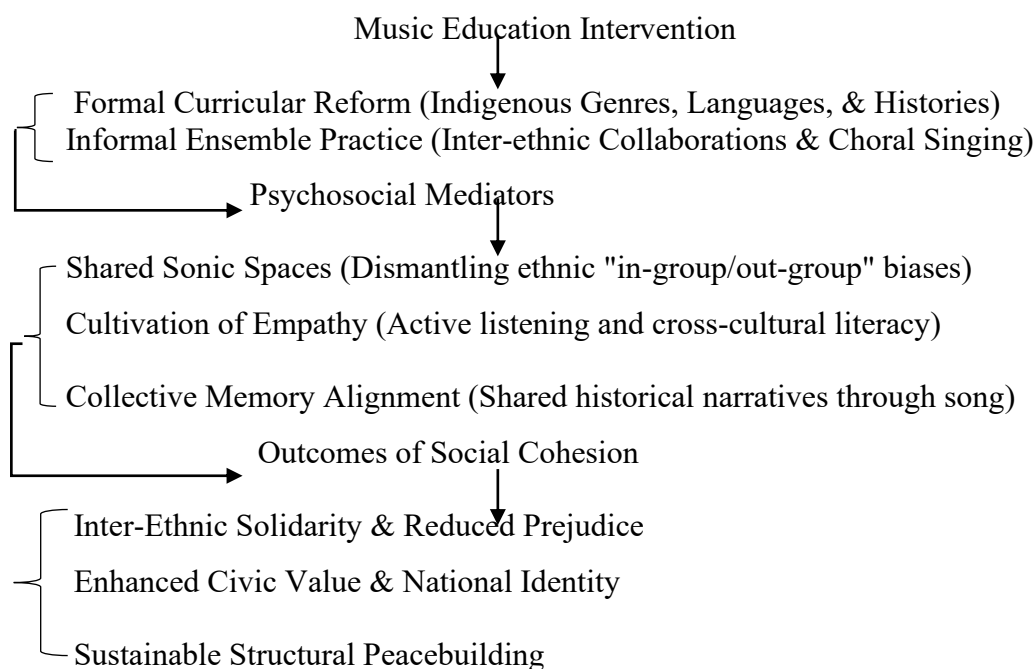
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, advanced by theorists such as Gloria Ladson-Billings and Geneva Gay, focuses on utilizing the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to enhance learning relevance and effectiveness. It is built on three core pillars: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

In Nigerian music education, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) calls for moving beyond solely Eurocentric curricula to adopt a pluriversal approach that recognizes indigenous musical traditions. When the curriculum highlights a student's local genre such as northern Kotso drumming, western Fuji, or eastern Highlife and or other ethnic local genres from other geographic location in Nigeria, it affirms their cultural identity within the educational environment. At the same time, introducing students to the musical practices of neighboring ethnic groups fosters cross-cultural understanding. This approach helps to demystify what is considered the "other," transforming unfamiliar sound traditions from being seen as foreign or primitive to being recognized as complex, legitimate forms of human expression.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study illustrates the operational pathway through which music education transforms societal fragmentation into sustainable social cohesion.



As shown above, the input consists of deliberate Music Education Interventions, divided into formal curricular reforms and informal ensemble practices. These inputs activate key Psychosocial Mediators. The classroom transforms into a shared sonic space where the rigid ethnic categorization identified by SIT is neutralized. Through the study of diverse regional musical structures, students develop cross-cultural literacy, which fosters deep cognitive and emotional empathy. Furthermore, learning songs from different regional histories fosters a shared collective memory, allowing students to celebrate shared national milestones and acknowledge collective historical traumas. These mediators directly generate the target Outcomes of Social Cohesion: a measurable reduction in inter-ethnic prejudice, an enhanced commitment to shared civic values, a stronger national identity, and a sustainable foundation for peacebuilding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education

The term 'education' is quite elusive and very difficult to pin down to a single definition (Ohwofasa, 2006: 97). In popular parlance, education has been said to be the bedrock of a nation. Education transforms lives (UNESCO). According to Oxford Languages, education is the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university.

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is seen as a characteristic of a group that works towards the well-being of its members, fights exclusion, fosters a sense of belonging and trust, and

offers upward mobility (OECD in Fonseca, Lukosch & Brazier 2018). Social cohesion is also seen as a sense of belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, and legitimacy (Beauvais in Fonseca, Lukosch & Brazier, 2018).

Music

Music is a unique art form that is a lyrical and auditory representation of a story. This implies that through patterned construction of words, rhythm, and instrumental collaboration, music provides listeners with insight into personal experiences and even in-depth interpretations of the world around them. This ability to not only entertain audiences, but also to illustrate a story and sculpt a message makes music one of the most powerful forms of art (www.theodysey.com/music-as-art in Olisaeke, 2019).

Music Education

Music education is the education of pupils, whether at the primary, secondary, or tertiary levels of education, including the general masses through sound and texts, the importance of social cohesion, what social cohesion is all about, and reasons why social cohesion is necessary in any setting, such as the home, institution, and the society at large. Ugoji (2021) asserts that music education represents a transformative approach to promoting social and emotional learning by intertwining culturally relevant contexts (Ugoji, 2021: 89). Though an aspect of music education is to train pupils to acquire knowledge and skills, music education is more than that; it teaches pupils how to develop social and emotional intelligence. This implies that music 'education' inculcates in pupils/students how to be empathetic towards one another. Adejube and Ajayi (2024:11) corroborate Ugoji (2021) that music education is beyond the classroom teaching of music.

TEXTUAL AND CONTEXTUAL EXAMPLES ACROSS NIGERIAN MUSIC GENRES

Why social cohesion? Where there is anarchy and chaos, no meaningful development can take place; hence, anarchy and chaos are two elements that represent regression, underdevelopment, stagnation, and backwardation. In a family where anarchy reigns, there is confusion, sadness, and unhappiness. In an institution where anarchy reigns, educational achievements among students or pupils are dwarfed; fighting and quarreling may even lead to death. In a society where anarchy rules, development is hindered and stunted. In a nation where there is anarchy, death, confusion, insecurity, and underdevelopment manifest themselves.

Many song lyrics, whether sacred or secular, have been composed to emphasize why social cohesion is of utmost importance. Music has a wide range of functions besides cultural and aesthetic values; every artistic expression has a potential social function. Music can create a sense of unity, togetherness, and solidarity, whether through live events, shared playlists, or cultural movements. Music has a way of bringing people together. The idea of music education and social cohesion is hinged

on bringing students/pupils of different cultural entities, pupils of different perspectives together to create an avenue to see each other as one. Thus, by participating in musical activities, students/pupils learn to build trust, communicate effectively, cooperate with others, and tolerate one another. Learning the music of other cultures provides pupils/students with an understanding of how those cultures operate and helps them appreciate them. Participating in musical activities, such as cultural day, builds in students/pupils a sense of collectiveness and social connectedness. Hence, making students/pupils rehearse together teaches and helps them to develop team spirit/relationship, and responsibility, including being able to work together harmoniously. This exercise brings to the fore the ability to comply with instructions or directives that are very apt to build a cohesive institutional atmosphere, society, and nation. Kakembo (2024:38), enunciates that music profoundly influences emotional and social development, beginning in infancy and extending through adulthood. It is not only a means of personal expression but also a tool that fosters emotional resilience, empathy, and social skills. Musical engagement promotes a sense of belonging and cultural identity, while shared musical experiences cultivate empathy and understanding across diverse groups.

Examining the textual and contextual dimensions of these genres reveals embedded themes of unity, morality, and socio-political cohesion. These themes were drawn across geographical regions in Nigeria.

1. Yoruba Fuji and Jùjú Genres originate from southwestern Nigeria. Fuji and Jùjú music are deeply rooted in Yoruba oral literature, poetry (Ewi), and philosophical constructs. A central pedagogical concept within these genres is the philosophy of Omoluabi, the embodiment of flawless character, humility, respect, and communal responsibility. In the classroom, analyzing the works of artists like King Sunny Adé or Sikiru Ayinde Barrister offers rich opportunities for character education and moral cohesion. For instance, in his classic tracks, King Sunny Adé frequently sings:

"Aiye n feni, fefe fe, aiye n feni, fefe fe... Ka sise fun ire ilu wa."	The world loves us superficially... Let us work for the goodwill and progress of our society.
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By viewing these texts critically, music educators can teach the universal values of civic duty and community preservation. Bringing Fuji's complex polyrhythmic structures (using instruments like the Gangan or talking drum) into formal education validates southwestern indigenous knowledge while teaching students from other regions the value of collaborative rhythmic synchronization.

2. Igbo Ogene and Highlife Genres originate from southeastern Nigeria, Ogene (an indigenous metal gong instrumentation) and Igbo Highlife serve as essential media for community cohesion, dialogue, and historical preservation. Ogene music is inherently participatory; it relies on a call-and-response structure (Kpukpo) that demands total group immersion. Chief Osita Osadebe, a legend of Igbo Highlife, utilized his music to preach economic justice, peace, and coexistence. In his seminal album Onu Kwulunjo, he asserts that good things multiply in an atmosphere of peace, as depicted below.

"If nma nma n'ime udo, udo ka mma."	Good things multiply in an atmosphere of peace; peace is ultimately supreme.
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Integrating Igbo Highlife into music education introduces students to the rich acoustic texture of the dual-gong systems, the Oja (flute), and specific harmonic progressions. Pedagogically, teaching non-Igbo students to play the Oja or to sing these choruses helps break down linguistic barriers. It transforms an unfamiliar language into an accessible artistic medium, creating shared joy and reducing inter-ethnic anxiety.

3. Hausa Kentu and Traditional Court Music hails from Northern Nigeria, musical traditions such as Kentu drumming, Goje (one-stringed fiddle) performance, and the royal court music of the Algaita are historically tied to social order, conflict resolution, and historical documentation. Northern folk music often incorporates the Hausa philosophy of Amana (trust, integrity, and peaceful cohabitation). The legendary Hausa musician Mamman Shata used his vast repertoire to educate the populace on civic responsibility, agricultural productivity, and national unity. In his songs addressing national development, Shata frequently underscored the importance of peaceful living.

"Mu zauna lafiya, mu gyara kasar mu, hadin kai shi ne karfi."	Let us live in peace to repair our country; unity is our absolute strength
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Using Hausa folk songs in a national music curriculum provides a vital counter-narrative to regional stereotypes. It teaches students across Nigeria to appreciate the melodic complexities of the Goje and the poetic structure of Hausa praise and social-commentary singing, underscoring the common human aspirations for safety, trust, and development.

4. Stop the Fight (Message to the Youth by Evi Edna Ogholi originate from Southern Nigeria.

Below is a textual excerpt of the message.

Stop the fight,
You may lose your life
Stop the fight,
You may lose your life
Come, drop that stick
You will injure your classmate
Your father and mother all at home
Praying for your success and your safe journey home.

Ogholi addresses the immediate, physical barriers to cohesion (communal and youth violence). By focusing on the classmate and the immediate community, the song writer frames peace not as an abstract political concept, but as a local, peer-to-peer responsibility. For social cohesion to exist, individuals must first cohabit safely. Dropping the weapon symbolizes a conscious decision to choose dialogue and harmony over division.

5. Contemporary Afrobeat - Afrobeat is inherently pluralistic. It frequently blends English, Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa phrases within a single track. For example, Burna Boy's 20-10-20 or social-commentary tracks by various artists

address systemic governance failures that affect all Nigerians, regardless of ethnicity. An example is; "One country, different tribe, but we face the same pain." Afrobeat can serve as an entry point for critical music pedagogy in a classroom setting, because youth across all geopolitical zones passionately consume this music, it offers a neutral, highly engaging platform to discuss national identity, youth advocacy, and social justice. Educators can leverage the production techniques, linguistic blending, and collaborative spirit of Afrobeat to inspire student-led songwriting projects that directly address national unity and social reform.

SUGGESTIONS

Oehrle (1996), in Crooke, Thomas, and Davidson (2023), elucidates that structured music participation (music education) has value in supporting ... harmony. Music promotes communication, develops appreciation and new behaviour patterns in relation to people, broadens our outlook on issues, helps us understand the world's cultures and their diversities, develops multicultural sensitivity, and is a unifying source with positive social significance. Above all, it is a way of breaking barriers and prejudices which isolate people from one another, a way of moving towards a culture of tolerance (p.99). The goal of any music education is human betterment through music. The variety of ways in which this takes place is infinite. Therefore,

- Community music education where students are taught values through music
- Communal music assignment – carrying out activities that involves students' participation, group assignment etc., should be encouraged in Schools.

The value of empathy should be inculcated through music among pupils irrespective of academic cadre. In addition, to fully harness music education as a tool for social cohesion, the Nigerian educational apparatus requires structural reforms across policy, curriculum design, and teacher training. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) must intentionally de-emphasize Eurocentric music theory as the sole baseline for musical literacy. The curriculum should give equal weight to indigenous notation, oral transmission techniques, and ethnomusicological histories from all geopolitical zones. Also, Schools should implement mandatory participation in mixed-genre ensembles. A school choir in Lagos should comfortably perform a Hausa Kentu song, an Igbo Highlife piece, and a Niger-Delta paddle song. This structural requirement ensures that cross-cultural empathy is practiced physically and vocally. Music education should be used as a vehicle to support Nigeria's National Policy on Education regarding trilingualism. Learning to sing fluidly in different Nigerian languages normalizes linguistic diversity and reduces the political friction associated with language dominance. Finally, Formal institutions should invite local traditional musicians and contemporary instrument makers into classrooms. This bridges the gap between institutional academic settings and informal communal spaces, enriching students' cultural competence.

CONCLUSION

Education enriches cultures and creates mutual understanding that underpins peaceful societies (Ugboh and Onwubuya, 2018). Since the educational communal space is a breeding ground for various ethnic diversities, it is important that planting the seed of social cohesion in students is given utmost preeminence, most especially from the primary school level, which is the foundation of all educational learning and pursuit. This is achievable through the education of pupils through music with songs/lyrics that encourage social cohesion amongst all. It is only in a peaceful environment that the totality of educational goals can be attained and achieved - as an extension, this is also applicable to the larger society. Where there is no peace, development cannot take place, goals and aspirations are thwarted, hence the advocacy for the education of pupils through music and shared musical activities in the communal space. Social cohesion in Nigeria cannot be achieved solely through legislative decrees or political accords; it must be cultivated within the hearts, minds, and daily habits of its youth. Music education offers a vibrant, deeply resonant path toward this goal. By anchoring practice in Social Identity Theory and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, educators can transform music classrooms into spaces of radical inclusion.

Through the study and performance of Yoruba Fuji, Igbo Highlife, Hausa traditional music, and contemporary Afrobeats, students discover that Nigeria's diversity is not a structural fault line, but a rich harmonic arrangement. When students lift their voices together and synchronize their rhythms across ethnic divides, they do more than learn music; they actively rehearse the cooperation, empathy, and mutual respect necessary to build a unified, peaceful nation.

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