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INDISPENSABILITY OF MUSIC IN POLITICS AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

AYEYEMI Ebenezer Oluwatoyin, Ph.D.

Abstract

Music is widely regarded as a fundamental aspect of human existence, permeating all stages of life from birth to death and extending beyond the production of ordinary sound to a meaningful cultural and communicative practice. Owing to its diverse functions in society, music occupies a significant position as a medium of communication, particularly in its persuasive application within the Nigerian political landscape. This paper examines the existence and functions of music in Nigerian politics, with specific attention to its role in political communication and mobilization, while also addressing the persistent tendency of political actors to underrate the discipline and neglect its development. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing content analysis of political campaign music, party jingles, and electoral performances, alongside observational insights from selected political events. Findings indicate that music serves as a potent instrument for persuasion, identity formation, and voter engagement in Nigerian politics, effectively shaping public opinion and reinforcing political messages. Despite this, the study reveals a clear contradiction between the extensive use of music in political processes and the lack of institutional support for its growth, as evidenced in poor policy attention and limited investment in music education and development. The paper, therefore, suggests practical measures for uplifting the status of music, including increased recognition of its societal value, strategic inclusion in policy frameworks, and enhanced support for music education and professional practice in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian politics, Political communication, Persuasion, Music mobilization, and Voter engagement

Introduction

Music is a universal phenomenon, yet its meanings and functions are culturally determined. In African societies, music is rarely autonomous; rather, it is embedded in social, religious, and political contexts. Music derives its significance from what it represents within specific cultural settings. In Nigeria, music permeates all aspects of life, from ritual and ceremony to governance and public discourse. Its functional orientation aligns with earlier observations that African music is context-bound and purpose-driven (Agawu, 2016). Within political spaces, music operates as a medium for communication, persuasion, and symbolic representation. Its performance covers all functions and ceremonies.

> *Music performed at work is different from music enjoyed during our leisure hours. The music for funeral ceremony is not the same as the music for marriage ceremony, Onwukwe (2003).*

Music making is into all human activities but at different social function which include funeral, marriage, burial, house warming, festivals, religious activities and of course political gathering which this paper centers on.

However, the contemporary Nigerian political landscape has introduced new dynamics. The rise of digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram has transformed the production, dissemination, and reception of political music. Music now circulates beyond physical rallies, reaching wider and even global audiences while shaping political narratives in real time. Empirical developments from 2015 to date demonstrate this progression across electoral cycles. In the 2015 general elections, political communication relied heavily on slogan-based campaign songs and jingles such as the APC "Change" anthem, often rendered in repetitive chant forms like "Change! Change! Change!" and adapted into various local-language versions for mass mobilisation.

Similarly, PDP campaign materials frequently used refrains such as "PDP Forever" and rhythmic praise-style chants supporting the incumbent structure, which were circulated on YouTube and broadcast media to reinforce party loyalty.

By the 2019 elections, campaign music became more structured and artist-driven. A prominent example was the Buhari campaign theme "Next Level," expressed in lyrical form as "We are going to the next level / Nigeria is moving forward," which was widely performed in campaign rallies and re-uploaded across digital platforms. In addition, political endorsements by popular musicians were often embedded in musical performances and remixed jingles shared on Facebook and YouTube, allowing songs to function as both entertainment and persuasive political messaging.

In the 2023 elections, political music became highly digitalised and participatory, particularly through TikTok and short-form video culture. Campaign-related musical expressions such as "Obi One Nigeria, Peter Obi dey lead" circulated as remix chants, while "Jagaban of Africa, Asiwaju Bola Tinubu" was adapted into multiple rhythmic street-pop and Fuji-influenced versions. These were further reinterpreted through user-generated content, dance challenges, and remix culture, making political music highly viral and interactive. Unlike earlier periods, the audience became co-creators of political musical meaning, continuously reshaping campaign messages through repetition, parody, and remixing.

Statement of Problem

Music is obviously an important tool in the hands of the politician in Nigeria. Despite its centrality in political communication, music remains underdeveloped within Nigeria's educational and institutional frameworks. Political actors rely heavily on music for campaigns, mobilization, and image construction, yet they demonstrate limited commitment to its academic and structural

development. In recent years, an additional challenge has emerged: the commercialization and politicization of music production. Musicians are increasingly commissioned to produce campaign content, often prioritizing political patronage over artistic and critical independence (Olorunyomi, 2022). This is so because of the improper curriculum planning for its existence. Music has not gained or achieved the purpose for which it was included as an academic subject.

This study addresses a structural paradox that existing literature has acknowledged but not systematically analyzed. While political scientists (Street, 2019) have examined music's mobilizational capacity, and ethnomusicologists (Olorunyomi, 2022) have documented musician-politician patronage networks, no study has explicitly theorized the disjuncture between music's *political utilization* and its *institutional marginalization* in Nigeria. Specifically, three gaps persist: (1) empirical documentation of how extensively Nigerian politicians deploy music versus their policy commitments to music development remains unquantified; (2) the mechanisms by which curriculum marginalization occurs (teacher shortages, examination exclusion, resource allocation) lack systematic analysis; (3) the long-term consequences of exploiting music as a campaign tool while neglecting its educational foundation have not been theorized. This paper addresses gap (1) through content analysis of campaign materials and policy documents, while proposing a research agenda for gaps (2) and (3).

Theoretical Framework

The indispensability of music in the Political development of Nigeria and of course in many other social activities in the daily life of the people is enormous. Therefore, the study is hinged on the Functionalist Theory of Music and Society. This theory provides a suitable framework for analysing music in Nigerian political practice

because it views music as a social institution that performs essential functions within society. The theory is rooted in Émile Durkheim's sociological work on collective consciousness and social cohesion (Durkheim, 1912/1995) and was later developed in musicology by Alan P. Merriam, who systematically outlined the functions of music in human society (Merriam, 1964). The main premise of the theory is that cultural practices persist because they serve specific social functions that sustain stability. It further holds that music operates as a medium of emotional expression, communication, and social integration, while also reinforcing shared values and institutional legitimacy. Merriam (1964) particularly emphasises music's roles in emotional release, communication of ideas, and validation of social structures.

The origin of the theory lies in classical sociology, especially Durkheim's analysis of rituals as mechanisms for reinforcing social solidarity. Merriam (1964) extended this perspective into ethnomusicology, and scholars such as Blacking (1973) further reinforced the view of music as a socially embedded human activity. In the Nigerian political context, this theory explains the functional use of music in electoral mobilisation and persuasion. From the 2015 "Change" campaign songs, through the 2019 "Next Level" musical slogans, to the 2023 TikTok-driven "Obidient" chants and "Jagaban" musical adaptations, political music has consistently functioned as a tool for ideological communication and voter engagement. Digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok have further expanded its reach, making political music more participatory and viral among youths.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis framework, examining political music materials spanning three electoral cycles (2015, 2019, 2023). Data sources include: (a) campaign songs and

jingles accessible via YouTube (n=47), (b) recorded rally performances (n=12), (c) TikTok political dance challenges (n=23), and (d) observational notes from three political rallies in Southwest Nigeria (Lagos, Ibadan, Akure). Purposive sampling prioritized materials that achieved demonstrable circulation (minimum 10,000 views or documented rally usage). Analytical coding followed Merriam's (1964) functional categories, with thematic analysis identifying recurring persuasive strategies, linguistic patterns, and digital adaptation techniques. To enhance trustworthiness, findings were triangulated against newspaper reports of campaign events (The Guardian, Punch, Vanguard; 2015-2024) and peer debriefing with two Nigerian ethnomusicologists.

Literature Review: Interrogating the Music-Politics Nexus

Scholarly discourse on music and politics has evolved through three phases. The first, represented by Merriam (1964) and Blacking (1973), positioned music as a *reflective* instrument—art responding to political conditions. The second phase, advanced by Street (2019) and others, reconceptualized music as *constitutive* of political identities, not merely responsive. The third, emerging phase examines *digital mediation*—how platforms transform political music's production, circulation, and reception (Adegoju, 2023).

Nigerian scholarship occupies an ambivalent position within this trajectory. Ajewole (2015) demonstrates music's role in national development discourse, while Olorunyomi (2022) critiques the political co-optation of musicians. However, existing studies predominantly examine either music's *effectiveness* for politicians (instrumental focus) or musicians' *agency* in political commentary (creative focus). Neither adequately addresses the *structural contradiction* this paper identifies: that political actors who depend on music as a resource simultaneously deplete its institutional foundations through policy neglect.

This study thus advances an institutional perspective, arguing that sustainable political musicianship requires robust educational and professional infrastructures—conditions currently absent in Nigeria. The functionalist framework, properly applied, reveals not merely what music *does* for politics, but what politics must *do for music* to ensure its continued utility. This reciprocal relationship constitutes the paper's original contribution.

The Concept of Politics and Music

Various definitions have been given to politics, part of which is given by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as speaking or acting in such a way as to make people argue amongst themselves, distrust each other, have doubts about the safety of their position etc., to gain an advantage for oneself.

There is the desire to become great in every individual human being and so politics is one major avenue to achieve greatness in life by nature as a political being. Man is born a politician. This is because man by birth has roots; he belongs to a family, society, state, nation and so on. This is so because man cannot be everywhere or nowhere, and by virtue of the fact that man is born somewhere his membership of such a society is not by accident. Politics may be either by birth or by affliction. Here, one does not choose where to belong but one belongs where-one finds oneself. By affiliation, it has to do with choice in interests and conventions that form one's aspirations, Akpaamo (2004). However, Classical political theory, particularly the formulation by Harold Lasswell, conceptualizes politics as "who gets what, when, and how," emphasizing its strategic and communicative nature. Music intersects with politics at this communicative level. It functions not merely as entertainment but as a rhetorical and symbolic tool that shapes public perception and collective identity (Street, 2019). Hoebel (1972) reflected on this and said:

> *Politics is the art of who gets what, when, and how. Like all good aphorisms, this packs a good deal of truth in a few pithy words. But, again, like all aphorisms, it leaves out as much as it says. All role definition, which runs through every aspect of culture, defines activities and duties, expectancies and obligations. All norms of social organization spell out who does what, who get what, when, where and how. Politics is one aspect of the cultural patterning and behavioural processes which are involved. It must be remembered that politics is not something discrete, an arena of life absolute unto itself. Politics is social behaviour with an orientation, a slant that gives it a colouring sufficiently different to warrant its own identity. But it is many hued, and its colours taken separately, are shared with other disciplines including music.*

Politics in the writer's view is a process by which an individual speaks or and acts himself to the interest of one and all to achieve his desired goal. As it were, people call it game. Every possible means is adopted to win the game. Since it is not a personal affair, whatever desired goal could not be achieved all alone. An activity that affects a neighborhood, a whole community, a whole society, or a group of societies is unquestionably public. Politics is goal-oriented; it is concerned with ends and means "What is it we want? And "How do we go about doing it" Hoebel (1972).

Music

Talking about music as a discipline in the arts and its mutual relationship with nature and man, it is a common phenomenon among

the human race but difficult to be given a unilateral interpretation because of the differences in practice by individual society in both Western and traditional culture throughout the universe, an attempt to generalise music of sub-Saharan African is dangerous and is bound to be unsatisfying. Blacking (1976) also corroborate this idea that:

> What turns one man off may turn another man on, not because of any absolute quality in music itself but because of what the music has come to mean to him as a member of a particular society or social group.

In any case, vast definitions have been accorded to music from the diversity of ideas from both Western and traditional points of view. Encyclopedia Americana (2003) sees it as the art by which a composer, through a performer as intermediary communicates to a listener a certain idea, feeling, or states of mind. Music, which makes use of tones, singly and in combinations may be subjective or objective, appealing to the emotions of the intellect. It is in essence; a tonal design created to stir and influence the listener. Hood (1989) views music as "the untalkable" considering the challenges of research. Vidal (2000) submits that music is a play with sound, a paragon of the experiences and activities of man, a reflection of those experiences and activities as well as a model for both. Music is a language spoken in all parts of the world through the medium of sound produced by human voice and some tonal and percussive instruments. It could also be defined by human voice and some tonal and percussive instruments. It could also be defined as the art of combining sound, and way of expressing soul or ideas with special regard to the beauty of form.

Music functions as much as possible in our day-to-day activities as it is known to perform an important role in society, for example individual and popular identities are often presented to the

community in the form of *ewi* and *oriki* among Yoruba in Nigeria gives the subjects his potentials. Well, it would be useless to attempt to Catalogue all the uses of music in our society as it continues as a medium of expression.

- Religions and Ceremonial music is an ever present category whose importance evidently increases as we move from complex to simple cultures.
- Social music is a large category than in most folk and non-literate societies.
- The large amount of music for entertainment such as playing of Dundun drums as well Brigade band at ceremonies is remarkable.
- The use of music for political purposes of various sorts should be noted. It is evident that in some African cultures, it is easier to indicate discontent with employers or with the government if the discontent is put into music than if it is spoken. There are therefore compositions expressing criticism of authority as well as to praise wealthy men and politicians.
- Music is used to spread information on current events of interest and perpetuate knowledge.
- Ritual music of a large category and styles among African is worth of note.
- Work songs that deal with labour as well as accompanying rhythmic work by group that makes the work interesting are prominent in the society.

Music in Political Campaigns

Rallies and campaigns are the pre-requisites for creating awareness of political parties among the masses at the grassroots level. Music composition does a great deal in creating this awareness in people and they easily get convinced beyond all reasonable doubts-through it. In other words, a musician is better able to change the

minds of people than any orator because he knows the type of music that would fit for any political gathering where campaigns are held. No wonder Ipere (2002:46) affirmed that:

> *Music and government reflect one another and that only the superior (broad hearted) man who can understand music is equipped to govern.*

Political parties have their peculiar anthem and or choruses composed to suit their objectives. For example the awareness of Obasanjo Atiku's second coming for 2003 election was created when Sunny Okosun in his composition came up with:

Nigeria, a great nation,
P.D.P., a great party
Which can cause Democracy
Obasanjo and Atiku
Will take us to the promise land

This was created to alert the masses to the interest of Obasanjo and Atiku's continuous process of governance. Lots of other songs were composed in this respect throughout the nation in both general language and dialect to achieve the purpose of creating awareness even at the grassroots. Recent elections have witnessed the strategic use of digital campaign music, where songs are circulated via streaming platforms and social media, targeting younger voters and diaspora communities (Adegoju, 2023).

Platform-Specific Dynamics in Digital Political Music

Analysis of 2023 election materials reveals distinct platform logics shaping political music. On YouTube, campaign songs functioned as *broadcast artifacts*—professionally produced, centrally controlled, and consumed passively (e.g., official "Jagaban" music videos averaging 2.3 minutes duration). TikTok, conversely, enabled *participatory remix*: the "Obi One Nigeria" chant generated over 15,000 user-interpretations, with creator-led dance challenges

amplifying reach algorithmically. Facebook served as *distribution infrastructure*, where older demographics shared pre-existing YouTube content rather than generating new interpretations.

This platform differentiation has two implications for functionalist theory. First, music's *social integration* function now operates across fragmented, algorithmically-sorted publics rather than unified physical gatherings. Second, the *emotional release* function becomes quantified through engagement metrics (shares, duets, comments), creating new forms of political participation that bypass traditional rally structures. Politically, this democratizes music production—any user can remix—but also fragments message control, as parodic or critical versions circulate alongside endorsements.

Applying Merriam's framework, the Obasanjo-Atiku campaign song exemplifies the *communication of ideas* function, encoding political messaging into memorable melodic structures. More critically, the digital circulation of contemporary campaign music serves Merriam's *emotional release* function, allowing supporters to participate vicariously in political action through song repetition and sharing. The 2023 "Obidient" TikTok chants demonstrate how music facilitates *social integration*—creating virtual communities of supporters who co-create political meaning through remix participation. Each of Merriam's ten functions thus finds empirical expression in Nigerian electoral music, validating the functionalist premise that music persists because it serves identifiable social needs.

Music in Social and Political Mobilization

Nigeria has experienced different faces of governance, democracy as well as military dictatorship. The Buhari Idiagbon regime enforced what is termed War Against Indiscipline (WAI). Music composition about this WAI was done by several Nigerian musicians in various part of the Nation to enable the citizens keep in mind the act of self-discipline.

Mass Mobilization for self-reliance, economic recovery, and social justice (MAMSER) was an unforgettable government programme in the 80s in Nigeria. This was successfully executed through series of rallies organized to reach the then twenty-one (21) States and the Federal Capital, Abuja through music composition. For example, Majek Fashek (one of the MAMSER music performers) used music to penetrate the Northern Islamic devotees with the language of their religion Assalam alaikum and by and large they were caried along with the programme.

In the political arena, music has been and will continue to be an integral part of and a sine-qua-non in the political rallies and political campaign Ipere (2002).

The production of music and music jingles pertaining to politics for the listening public can best be digested through the media. Materials such as Ewi (chant), speech rhythms, short songs with and without accompaniment suitable for the audience has also been put on the air. The aim is to educate, enlighten and inform the masses about political programmes. Through media, music, report of deeds and views of citizens about government have been observed. The media-music review programme gives room for commendation, justification and a come-back recommendation of either President, State Governors or Local Government Chairmen. For example, during the time of the ex-governor of Ekiti State, Otunba Adeniyi Adebayo of Alliance for Democracy (A.D) a group popularly known as EYOFA (Ekiti Youths for Adebayo) emerged to give support to the governor. In 2002, they composed an anthem, adapting it to a Christian hymn tune of ***There shall be showers of blessing:***

Adeniyi Adebayo
A government of the people
A lot of projects everywhere
All over Ekiti State
We all happy

For your lofty achievements
Adebayo for second term
As governor Ekiti State.

Democratic government needs various media such as music and the press as foster partners in carrying out his functions effectively, to fulfill democratic objectives Idamoyibo (2002).

In the same vein, political opponents can use music in so many ways to run down, dethrone, and destroy their political rivals, especially when the rival is a political guru. The heart of the masses will thereby be poisoned against the rival especially when embezzlements of the government fund is discovered and also when the masses who voted such a political figure into power suffer hardship as a result of the nonchalant attitude of the government to their welfare. In their negative response to the individual, intuitive compositions of antagony against him would be released. For example, satirical songs were used against Otunba Adeniyi Adebayo of Ekiti State by the Ikere-Ekiti community towards the end of his regime to expose his inability to complete the road connecting Ikere with Igbara-Odo Ekiti in the year 2003. The song goes thus:

Erukutu lari o a mo roda	*It is the dust we see and not a tarred road*
Jibiti leyi o Adebayo o	*This is fraud, Adebayo.*

At another occasion, another satirical song was directed against him to show that the whole state community was fed up with his government and the people held him up by his slogan, Adebayo carry go which means that Adebayo should carry on with the government, but this was twisted against him to mean that he should carry his government and go. The song:

Adebayo carry go, uwo nimo ko	*Adebayo carry go, you are the one who wrote it*
Epe on se le o lulawe ni mo ni	*The curse chanted on you at Ilawe has affected you*
E mo soni ran o ni geesi O o ra o	*No one compels you to speak English, you have injured yourself.*

Musician act as watchdog to the politicians, once the assessment of the politician is faulty, members of the public will naturally withdraw their support and within a twinkling of an eye, songs of antagonism would be released especially by opposing parties.

Music as Political Entertainment and Patronage

Among the functions of music is entertainment. In any social gathering or programme, political gathering inclusive, the effect of music cannot be overemphasized. Musicians are usually employed to keep politicians in a good and relaxed mood, direct their hearts towards a particular intention or object of discussion and disabuse their minds about an earlier opinion etc.

In the year 2003 for example, various musicians of note were employed to entertain National and International Politicians at the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja at the visit of the Ex-president of America Bill Clinton. Such political gatherings afford us the opportunity to listen to various types of music performance either vocally with or without instruments or purely instrumental music. Ayeyemi (2004). From the foregoing, Music remains central to political entertainment, providing ambience and influencing audience engagement at rallies and official events. However, the relationship between musicians and political actors has become increasingly complex. Celebrity endorsements and political patronage have blurred the boundaries between artistic expression and political alignment (Street, 2019).

Strategic Recommendations

Based on the analysis above, this paper proposes four evidence-grounded interventions:

1. **Curriculum Integration with Accountability Mechanisms**
   The National Universities Commission (NUC) and Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) should mandate music as a standalone subject in basic

education (not subsumed under Creative Arts). Implementation should include: (a) ratio targets (one qualified music teacher per 500 students), (b) examination inclusion (music questions in common entrance and WASSCE), and (c) annual audit of music program funding. The Greek model cited earlier requires *enforcement*, not mere recommendation.

2. **Political Music Regulation Framework**
   The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should extend its campaign finance regulations to include music production. Specifically: (a) disclose payments to musicians for campaign content, (b) mandate disclaimer statements in political songs ("paid political material"), and (c) establish a public archive of campaign music to enable scholarly and journalistic scrutiny. This addresses Olorunyomi's (2022) concern about hidden patronage.

3. **Musicians' Ethical Guidelines**
   Professional associations (e.g., Performing Musicians Association of Nigeria) should develop codes of conduct regarding political commissions, including transparency clauses and conflict-of-interest disclosure. Musicians accepting political patronage should not simultaneously claim independent political commentary status without clear demarcation.

4. **Research and Data Infrastructure**
   The National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) should establish a digital repository of Nigerian political music (1979-present), enabling longitudinal analysis of rhetorical strategies, musical evolution, and platform migration. Current reliance on researcher-compiled YouTube samples (this study's limitation) is unsustainable for rigorous scholarship.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated that music occupies a structurally embedded and functionally indispensable position within Nigeria's political and democratic landscape. Beyond its aesthetic value, music operates as a communicative and mobilizing apparatus through which political consciousness is constructed, disseminated, and negotiated. Its deployment in campaigns, civic sensitization, and ideological projection underscores its capacity to encode intention, shape public perception, reinforce collective identity, and stimulate participatory engagement within the democratic process. In this regard, music is not merely an adjunct to politics but a critical medium of political expression and social interaction.

However, a fundamental contradiction persists. Despite its pervasive utilization by political actors—particularly among the elite—music as an academic discipline and professional field remains institutionally marginalized and structurally underdeveloped. This disjunction between functional relevance and systemic neglect reveals a broader deficit in policy prioritization, where the instrumental value of music is exploited without corresponding investment in its pedagogical, creative, and research infrastructures. Such a condition ultimately constrains the sustainability, innovation, and ethical grounding of music's contributions to democratic culture.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's reliance on publicly accessible digital materials (YouTube, TikTok) excludes locally-circulating political music that never reaches these platforms—potentially biasing findings toward urban, youth-oriented, and internet-accessible political expression. Rural campaign music, often performed live without digital recording, remains unrepresented. Additionally, the absence of

musician interviews limits understanding of artists' negotiating strategies within patronage relationships.

Future research should: (a) conduct ethnographic fieldwork during off-cycle elections (Edo, Ondo, Anambra) to capture non-digital political music practices; (b) employ survey methods to measure music's actual persuasive effects on voting behavior (this study demonstrates *usage* but not *causation*); (c) comparatively analyze Nigerian political music with Ghanaian or Senegalese cases to isolate Nigeria-specific dynamics; and (d) longitudinally track music education policy implementation beyond this paper's recommendations.

Consequently, this study advances a compelling imperative for deliberate and strategic intervention. The development of music must be reconceptualized as a national priority, necessitating robust policy frameworks, enhanced funding mechanisms, and curricular repositioning across all levels of education. Strengthening music education and practice will not only consolidate its artistic and cultural relevance but also deepen its efficacy as a tool for political enlightenment, civic responsibility, and democratic consolidation. A revalorized music sector—adequately supported within academic, social, political, and cultural domains—holds significant potential for fostering a more informed, engaged, and participatory citizenry in Nigeria's evolving democracy.

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